University of Alberta

Leaving an Abusive Relationship and Finding Hope: Women's Experiences in Postsecondary Education

by

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To my mother, Mary Wallace Nielsen, who always believed in me

and whose unconditional love provided the firm foundation

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Beginning

As an adult educator and a counsellor I have a long-time interest in the process of personal change, especially in how people maintain change once they have put it into practice. Most of us know from personal experience that change is difficult and that maintaining change is often a struggle. The number of people who make resolutions each year to quit smoking or begin exercise programs can attest to that! I am especially interested in the concept of education as a transformative change and the barriers that formerly abused women face as they attempt to maintain change and meet their educational goals while at the same time choosing to lead a life free of abuse.

For a number of years I have practised as a feminist family and group therapist with a specialisation in the area of family violence. There are many definitions of what it means to be a *feminist* and what is meant by *feminisms* (Miles, Rezai-Rashti, & Rundle, 2001). Etaugh and Bridges (2004) identified liberal feminism, cultural feminism, socialist feminism, and radical feminism. They maintained that although these feminists were united in their belief that women are disadvantaged relative to men, they differed on the sources of this inequality. Elliot and Mandell (2001) added postmodernist feminism to their list of feminisms. Briefly, liberal feminism is the belief that women and men should have the same political, legal, economic, and educational rights and opportunities

(Henley, Meng, O'Brien, McCarthy, & Sockloskie, 1998). Cultural feminists, according to Etaugh and Bridges, believe that more respect and value should be given to women's special qualities, such as nurturance. Socialist feminists believe that in oppression gender, ethnicity, and social class interact with one another to produce and maintain inequality. Radical feminism is the belief that gender inequality is based on male oppression of women (Elliot & Mandell, 2001). Postmodernism, according to Lyotard (1979/1984), is about the rejection of universal theories, of disrupting traditional boundaries between the dominant and the marginal, between theory and practice, and between art and life. In postmodern feminism the focus is on diversity and a belief that the unique and situated perspective of each individual is valid (Latting, 1995).

Growing up in a highly oppressive society in which there was only one way to be a woman and working for many years in the field of family violence influenced and reinforced my beliefs about the oppression of women and inequality. When I was first asked to situate myself as a feminist, I had difficulty placing myself in any one category. Reading extensively did not completely clarify the issues. I am a therapist who works mainly with women who are victims of violence; thus I am interested in oppression and its links to patriarchy. Because of this, I have at times been labelled a radical feminist. I do not, however, like "fixed" definitions; rather, I prefer fluidity and allowing for movement and change. According to Blake (1998), this would define me as a postmodern feminist. Ultimately, I have come to call myself a "qualified" liberal feminist. Liberal feminism is a form of feminism that argues that equality for

women can be achieved through legal means and social reform and that it is societal barriers that hinder women's advancement rather than inherent differences between the genders (Barrett, 1998). I agree with these ideas. In addition, like liberal feminists, I place great value on the idea of equal educational opportunities for women. It is this interest in women and education that led me to my second career as a tutor and seminar instructor at both the university and college level. I have worked as a distance educator in adult and continuing education and currently work as a distance educator in women's studies and criminology.

Teaching for me is very much an interactive process during which the students come to know who I am and I come to learn many things about them. It became clear to me soon after I began teaching adult students that many of the women had experienced some form of abuse from an intimate partner, and many were also lone parents struggling to raise children with little support or few resources. It was this realisation, combined with my own early experiences and my interest in family violence, that resulted in my current research interest.

Purpose of the Study

This study has brought all of my interests together. My intention was to explore how women who had left an abusive relationship and returned to postsecondary education maintained their participation in postsecondary education. I was interested in what they saw as potential barriers to continued participation and how they dealt with the stresses and strains associated with being returning students while at the same time dealing with the many issues of

abused women. Finally, I was interested in whether the women saw the educational experience as a process that had contributed to their personal change. Specifically, the questions that guided my research are as follows:

1. How do women who have left abusive relationships and returned to postsecondary education cope with the stresses and strains of being a student while at the same time dealing with the many issues of abused women?
2. What do they perceive as the potential barriers to maintaining participation in postsecondary education?
3. Do they perceive their educational experience as a process that has contributed positively to their personal change?

Definitions

The following are the definitions of terms used in this study:

Maintaining participation: Having finished at least one year of a degree or certificate program with plans to complete the course.

Postsecondary education: Any undergraduate degree- or certificate-granting academic program in a college or university.

Returning students: Those women who fit the description of nonmatriculated applicants as described in the University of Alberta calendar (i.e., who were 24 years or older at the time of admission).

Formerly abused women: Those participants who have been out of the abusive relationship for at least one year prior to enrolling in postsecondary education. When women leave an abusive relationship, they are frequently

in crisis. According to Roberts and Dziegielewski (1995), crisis is a temporary state of upset and disequilibrium, characterised by an inability to cope. Some sort of crisis resolution happens within four to six weeks. In addition, according to Bowker (1993), although some abused women develop battered woman syndrome (BWS), once they are safe, many begin to recover and experience symptoms for only a short time. A time period of one year will allow the women time to deal with the immediate crisis of leaving and to do some psychological healing before embarking on educational pursuits.

Abuse: Any act of physical abuse experienced by the woman while in an intimate heterosexual relationship. An act of physical abuse can range from pushing to pinching, slapping, punching, kicking, or hair pulling. Physical abuse is also any abusive behaviour that involves a weapon or any object used to inflict pain or injury (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997).

Relationship: Any committed heterosexual relationship that has lasted for a minimum of one year. When women face ongoing violence, they engage in complex manoeuvres to alter the meaning of the abuse. They ascribe attributions to their abuser that excuse or minimise his behaviour (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993), they blame personal attributes for the abuse (Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991), and they create a new identity as the strong spouse with a responsibility to help the abuser (Mills, 1985). This clearly does not happen overnight, and in order to elucidate how the experience of the abusive relationship impacts on an abused woman's

perceived ability to maintain change, the woman would have to have been in a relationship long enough to have experienced some of the impact

Background

Reentry Women: Women Who Are Adult Students

Women who are adult students returning to postsecondary education face a number of potential barriers to success. Traditionally, university educators have taught men more effectively than they have women (Maher & Tetreault, 1994), and knowledge and curricula have been constructed from an androcentric perspective (Minnich, 1990). Saul (1992), in her study of adult women returning to postsecondary education, noted the importance to the students of curricula with women-centred content.

In addition, most Canadian women are more economically disadvantaged than are men (Alberta Law Reform Institute, 1995; Day & Brodsky, 2000; De Wolff, 2000; Drolet, 2001; Lee & Engler, 2000; Smith, 1990b). For many women returning to postsecondary education, lack of finances is a significant hardship (Campbell, 1993; Christensen, 1994; Lavell, 1998). For women with children, taking time for coursework is often as difficult as finding money. Lack of adequate childcare poses additional problems (Campbell, 1993; Christensen, 1994), as do isolation and lack of family support (Edwards, 1993; Redding & Dowling, 1992). Gondolf (1988) found that factors associated with lack of economic dependence—for example, lack of income, child care, and transportation—were important factors in abused women's decision to return to their partners; that is, not to pursue and maintain whatever changes they had

initiated upon leaving the relationship. Finally, carrying either work or family responsibilities as well as participating in postsecondary education can result in stress, role conflict, and overload for many women (Edwards, 1993; Home, 1997, 1998).

In spite of the stresses and strains associated with returning to postsecondary education, Canadian women in general are entering postsecondary education in ever-increasing numbers. In 2002 there was a significant gender difference in postsecondary participation. Women were 62% more likely to enrol in university and 66% more likely to enrol in college than were men (Dubois, 2002). In addition, according to Peters (2000) and Lemaire and Home (1992), most reentry women find their return to formal studies to be an enriching experience. In the words of one of the participants in the study by Peters, "I can't believe I'm a graduate. Looking back, it's a very exciting and fruitful part of my life. I don't want to stop" (p. 44).

Women and Abuse

In recent years considerable research has been directed at an attempt to understand the dynamics of "wife" assault (Anderson, 2003; Belknap, 1999; Bograd, 1992, 1994; Campbell, Miller, Cardwell, & Belknap, 1994; Cardarelli, 1997; DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Lee, Thompson, & Mechanic, 2002; Sleutal, 1998; Walker, 1984). According to McDougall (1993), little of this research has examined the process of change or experience of change. Horsman (1995), in her work with women in literacy programs, pointed out that there is very little literature on the impact of abuse on women's learning. Walker (1979)

and Grieve (1994) stated that education has a place in abused women's decision-making process, but neither author spoke to the issue of motivation or barriers that may interfere with participating in education. Many authors have shown that spousal abuse of women has psychological impacts that can lead to feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, learned helplessness, and low self-esteem (Bowen, 1982; Hilberman & Munson, 1977-1978; Maertz, 1990; Walker, 1979). Lempert (1992) referred to the negative impact of verbal abuse on abused women's perception of their own competence. According to Browne (1993) and Walker (1983, 1984), exposure to ongoing violence in relationships results in many battered women developing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Watson, Barnett, Nikunen, and Schultz (1997) reported a prevalence rate of PTSD in abused women that is three times greater than that found in a nonabused comparison group. Symptoms include high levels of anxiety, depression, and fearfulness, as well as impaired concentration.

Lakeman (2000) noted that 25 years after the first wife-abuse shelters were established in Canada, wife abuse and sexual harassment have not declined appreciably. According to Statistics Canada (1995), over half of Canadian women have been victims of at least one act of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16. According to Health Canada (2002), women continue to outnumber men nine to one as victims of assault by a spouse or partner; and the Canadian Centre for Justice (2002) observed that women aged 25 to 34 had the highest rates of spousal violence reported to the police in 2001. Given the level of intimate abuse prevalent in society, it seems not unreasonable to assume that a

number of women participating in postsecondary education are likely to be victims of spousal abuse. In addition, it also seems reasonable to expect that battered women's experience of abuse may well influence their perception of their competence and sense of efficacy and thus potentially impede their ability to participate successfully in educational pursuits.

Significance of the Proposed Study

The existing documentation on how women who have left abusive relationships and returned to postsecondary education cope with the stresses and strains of being a student while at the same time dealing with the many issues of abused women is sparse. Although there is research on the barriers that reentry women experience as they attempt to maintain participation, there appears to be no information directly related to women who have left abusive relationships. Similarly, there is a paucity of information as to whether or not the experience contributed positively to their personal change. The proposed research will help to fill in the gaps and contribute to a broader understanding of women's ability to maintain their participation in postsecondary education.

A clearer understanding of the barriers related to abused women's ability to maintain participation and what they see as important in connection with their ongoing commitment to further education may help postsecondary educational institutions to put into place helpful policies and procedures.

Organisation of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 has provided an introduction to the study and focuses on the purpose and significance of the study. Chapter 2 is a comprehensive review of the relevant literature as it pertains to the impact of abuse and how people cope with trauma. The literature pertaining to reentry women is also discussed, as well as the literature pertaining to hope, because hope turned out to be an important construct. Chapter 3 describes the research approach to the study, including a discussion of some of the difficulties that I, as the researcher, experienced. This chapter also discusses the research design and introduces the participants. Chapter 4 presents the themes and discussion, and the final chapter concludes with a summary and recommendations.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In keeping with the purpose of my study, I reviewed the literature on four main topics. The first section discusses the issue of women abuse and the impact of abuse. Because the ability to cope effectively with trauma turned out to be of great significance to the participants, the next two sections focus on coping. The second section presents the relevant literature on coping with trauma, and the third section presents some of the literature on hope and its relationship to coping and trauma. Some emphasis has been given to the literature on hope because it emerged as a major theme. The final section describes some of the relevant literature on reentry women; that is, women who have returned to university or college after a significant break.

Impact of Abuse

It is clear that many women experience abuse in their relationships and that intimate violence against women has been accepted as a serious social problem, although the debate on the extent continues (Browne, 1993; Canadian Centre for Justice, 2002; DeKeseredy, 2000; Duffy & Momirov, 1997; Gelles, 2000; Smith Hall, Thornton, DeVellis, Earp, & Coker, 2002; Yllo, 1993). Many authors have reported that spousal abuse of women has psychological impacts and can lead to feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, learned helplessness, and low self-esteem (Bowen, 1982; Carlson, 1997; Hilberman & Munson, 1977-

1978; Maertz, 1990; Tutty, Bidgood, & Rothery, 1993; Walker, 1979). Gordon (1988) talked about the diminution of self-confidence experienced by women in violent relationships, and Lempert (1992) referred to the negative impact of verbal abuse on abused women's perceptions of their own competence. Lynch and Graham-Bermann (2000) discussed the correlation between psychological abuse and low self-esteem. According to Browne (1993) and Walker (1983, 1984), exposure to ongoing violence in relationships results in the development of symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in many battered women. Walker (1983) described battered woman syndrome as a subcategory of PTSD.

Trauma is an emotional shock that creates substantial damage to an individual's psychological development (Family Violence, 1993; Herman, 1992). Trauma occurs when an event is experienced that is incompatible with a person's fundamental beliefs about the world and he or she is unable to make meaning of it (Cason, Resick, & Weaver, 2002; Janoff-Bulman, 1997). It is an overwhelming experience that has psychological impacts for victims and creates feelings of helplessness, vulnerability, and loss of safety and control (Family Violence, 1993; Herman, 1992).

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to an ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Traumatic events that can trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults, but PTSD can also develop as a result of witnessing a threat or serious harm to a family member or close associate (Harvard Health, 2001). It is clear that children living in a home where there is spousal abuse are themselves at great risk of being physically abused by

the abusive parent (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Straus, 1990). Thus abused women are at risk for developing PTSD not only as a result of the violence that they experience, but also, potentially, as a result of seeing the violence inflicted on their children. According to a survey circulated to women's shelters in Alberta, "Shelter staff estimated that over half of the residents present with a posttraumatic stress reaction to partner abuse" (Tutty, 1998, p. 87). Watson et al. (1997) reported a prevalence rate of PTSD in abused women that was three times greater than that found in a nonabused comparison group. Symptoms include high levels of anxiety, depression, fearfulness, and impaired concentration. Stein, Kennedy, and Twamley (2002) noted that several researchers (Bremner et al., 1993; Jenkins, Langlais, Delis, & Cohen, 1998) have found evidence of learning and memory problems in people with PTSD. In their study Stein et al. (2002) did not find significant differences in learning and memory between participants with posttraumatic stress disorder and those without, but they did find changes in brain patterns and subtle differences in cognitive performance between the two groups. Tutty and Goard (2002) noted that coping with an abusive relationship can create considerable anxiety. Carlson (1997) also reported that many abused women experience shame and self-blame for the abuse. In a single-subject case study of an abused woman, Belknap (1999) identified shame as an issue. Levendosky, Lynch, and Graham-Bermann (2000) obtained unsolicited reports of feelings of guilt from the abused women who participated in their study.

Summary

There is little doubt that being abused by an intimate partner is a traumatic event (Family Violence, 1993; Houskamp & Foy, 1991; Kemp, Green, Hovanitz, & Rawlings, 1995). According to Nishith, Griffin, and Poth (2002), "Battering relationships have a component of both chronicity and inescapability in which the perpetuation of trauma often does not cease even after the woman has left the relationship" (p. 869). This "chronicity" and "inescapability" appear to interfere with a person's ability to process trauma and thus contribute to longer duration of posttraumatic stress symptoms in women abused over time by an intimate partner.

Coping With Trauma

According to Tedeschi (1999), violence can act as a catalyst for personal growth and transformation. Positive change seems to be dependent on developing a way to understand trauma in personal terms; that is, positive change can happen if people can "develop a narrative that allows them to once again view the world as comprehensible and meaningful" (p. 3). An important step seems to be a change in perception of self from victim to survivor (Tedeschi, 1999) or moving beyond the image of being an abused woman and taking on a new image (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2002). The time needed to work through this process varies from individual to individual but, according to Tedeschi (1999), it takes at least a year. Survivors need time to disengage from old beliefs and goals and to develop new or revised goals, beliefs, and assumptions. This disengagement appears to be a necessary step in the movement from victim to survivor.

Survivors engage actively in change or in redefining the situation as something that they can change; they do something different (Brown, 1997; Draucker, 2003). O'Hanlon (2002) maintained that moving on from trauma involves "connecting to a future with possibilities" (p. 10). O'Hanlon also talked about the value of journaling, exercising regularly, attending spiritual gatherings, and contributing to the community by doing volunteer work as ways that survivors heal and move on.

Most adults cope with traumatic experiences without formal treatment (Janoff-Bulman, 1997). They rely on themselves, their friends, and their family. Leaving the abusive relationship is in itself a coping strategy that can lead to self-growth (Pilkington, 2000). Some women, when they leave an abusive relationship, seek shelter in transition houses or women's shelters. Orava, McLeod, and Sharpe (1996) noted that a stay in a transition house can have a powerful effect, as the women in their study demonstrated when their depressive symptoms decreased and self-esteem increased.

Counselling can also be a method for women who have left abusive relationships to deal with the impact of the abuse. It is beyond the scope of this review to examine all of the literature pertaining to the effectiveness of counselling; however, it is clear that counselling or psychotherapy is an effective way of helping people to deal with their problems (Austad, 1996; Campbell, 1996; Prout & Prout, 1998; Small, 1971; Stiles, Shapiro, & Elliott, 1986; Talmon, 1990). Researchers who studied the effectiveness of various counselling modalities, however, frequently did not see gender as a factor; thus, they did not

take it into account. Psychological research is value laden, and researchers are just as likely as anyone else to be influenced by gender-role stereotypes (Lips, 1999; Paludi, 1998; Ussher, 1992). Thus, it is not clear whether one approach is more effective than another when working with women. In an exhaustive review of feminist counselling, Enns (1993) found that although there is evidence that a feminist approach to working with women is helpful, there needs to be more research and a more unified approach. Enns maintained that the literature on feminist therapy has been "rich with clinical examples," but that important clinical findings "within the psychology of women" (p. 65) have not been integrated with therapeutic approaches. Congress (1995) contended that time-limited treatment is an effective way of helping women to deal with crisis events. Lubin, Loris, Burt, and Johnson (1998), in a preliminary study of psychoeducational group therapy, found that group therapy was effective in decreasing psychiatric distress and PTSD symptoms in multiply traumatised women.

Maintenance of change is a crucial part of the coping process. Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente (1994) argued that among the most common threats to maintenance are social challenges or special situations. Social threats are those from outside; they are external to the person. Special situations are those that arise when we are confronted by the unusual. One of the social threats specific to formerly abused women in maintaining change is lack of support. Isolation and secrecy are part of the dynamic of spousal abuse. Women leaving abusive relationships frequently find themselves struggling alone, and as McDougall

(1993) noted, they need support to break free of the "isolation and secrecy that dominated their experience of abuse" (p. 38). Support is a somewhat generic term, but in its broadest sense it has to do with resources (that is, the human resources available to abused women). Argyle (1989) stated that social support can prevent tension, distress, ill heath, and mental disorder brought on by stress. Family and friends can provide this support, but, according to Morris (1990), so can children. In fact, children can make a significant contribution in terms of emotional support and undertaking domestic tasks. All of these factors may be related to how abused women maintain change and thus to their persistence in pursuing postsecondary education.

As noted above, special situations are those that arise when we are confronted by the unusual. Clearly, returning to postsecondary education may well be a special situation. In addition, abused women may face a number of other unusual experiences, such as stalking by the abusive ex-partner, ongoing custody disputes and legal battles, intermittent child maintenance payments, and so on. All of these have the potential of interfering with a person's ability to cope.

Summary

Trauma occurs when an event is experienced that is incompatible with a person's beliefs about the world. It can be an overwhelming experience that can have significant emotional and psychological impacts on the victim. Many authors (e.g., Browne, 1993; Walker, 1983, 1984; Watson et al., 1997) have

noted that spousal abuse is a traumatic event and that many battered women develop symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder because of their experiences.

Although traumatic events can result in a number of emotional and psychological problems, the experience of trauma can also be a catalyst for personal growth. A shift to positive changes seems to occur for those people who are able to move from seeing themselves as survivors to seeing themselves as victims and who come to believe that they have a future in which there is a possibility of things being different.

The time needed to work through this process varies from individual to individual, but, according to Tedeschi (1999), it takes at least a year. Survivors need time to disengage from old beliefs and goals and to develop new or revised goals, beliefs, and assumptions. This disengagement appears to be a necessary step in the movement from victim to survivor. Tedeschi's estimate that people need at least a year to begin to experience trauma as a catalyst for growth seems to hold true in the current study.

Posttraumatic growth can be enhanced if victims have supports such as family or friends. Certainly in this study, family, especially the children of the participants, seemed to be a very important source of support. Posttraumatic growth can also be enhanced if victims are able to engage in activities such as helping others, taking care of themselves spiritually, or participating in counselling. All of these aspects proved to be important to the participants in this study.

Conversely, isolation, lack of supports, unresolved psychological issues, and special or unusual situations can negatively affect posttraumatic growth. Abused women may face a number of special circumstances, such as stalking by an abusive ex-partner, ongoing legal battles and custody disputes, intermittent child maintenance payments, and the like. Many of the women in the current study struggled with one or more of these issues.

Depending on the timing of the event, returning to postsecondary education, with its additional stresses and demands, may be a special situation that, as such, has the potential to inhibit or interrupt posttraumatic growth.

Hope

According to Perry (2002), hope is the capacity that carries people through challenges, loss, and trauma. People who successfully deal with trauma and convert their pain into growth rather than despair seem to have this capacity for hopefulness (Tedeschi, 1999). It is this ability to think that things will get better that allows people to be resilient, to bounce back from adversity (Higgins O'Connell, 1994).

Understanding hope is no easy task (Jevne, 1994). It is hard to define, and it is a concept that holds a unique meaning for each of us. Farran, Herth, and Popovich (1995) pointed out that the concept of hope can be elusive because it can be expressed behaviourally, cognitively (as a way of thinking), and affectively (as a way of feeling). The word itself can be a noun, a verb, or an adjective. Dufault and Martocchio (1985) suggested that hope is a multidimensional complex of many thoughts, feelings, and actions. Snyder

(1995) defined hope as "the process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move toward (agency) and the ways to achieve (pathways) those goals" (p. 355). Lazarus (1999) described hope as an emotion that stimulates efforts to seek improvement in an unsatisfactory situation. It is, according to Lazarus, a "coping process" (p. 657). According to Farran et al., "Hope constitutes an essential experience of the human condition. It functions as a way of feeling, a way of thinking, a way of behaving and a way of relating to oneself and one's world" (p. 6). They observed that hope can still be present even if the desired outcome does not occur.

Pruyser (1986) maintained that the language used when speaking of hope is imprecise and that "all kinds of dispositions and processes are undeservedly paraded under the terms hope and hoping" (p. 120). Hope, for example, is not the same as wishful thinking. The goals of wishful thinking tend to be quite specific, and people who wish for something usually think only of the possibility of a positive outcome. Wishing tends to be a passive activity, and the person who is wishing tends not to actively engage in behaviours that would work towards achieving a positive outcome. The probability of the desired outcome actually happening is usually quite limited (Farran et al., 1995). Wishful thinking is inflexible, and people who "expect" or wish for desired outcomes are not open to creative alternatives or new ideas. They may, in fact, not recognize a benefit if it is different from their expected or wished-for outcome (Pruyser, 1986).

Optimism is not the same as hope. Optimism, according to Farran et al. (1995), is based on a philosophical belief that good will ultimately triumph over

evil. Optimistic thinking, like wishful thinking, focuses on a positive outcome and, like wishful thinking, is more likely than hope to be closed to painful feelings. Although the goals of optimism are, like those of wishful thinking, more specific than the goals of hope, the likelihood of achieving the goals may be greater than in wishful thinking (Farran et al., 1995).

Farran et al. (1995) summed up the concept of hope in terms of four central attributes: an experiential process, a spiritual process, a rational-thought process, and a relational process. According to their definition, the experiential process is the pain of hope, the spiritual process is the soul of hope, the rational process is the mind of hope, and the relational process is the heart of hope.

Much of our understanding about hope comes from the field of nursing and medicine. According to Wilkes (2002), in the past 20 years definitive research has been conducted on the value of hope as it relates to ill health and how patients cope. Wall (as cited in Jenkins, 1996a) maintained that the contribution of hope to increased health is real and has been measured. Conversely, whereas hope enhances health, hopelessness appears to change behaviour and have a negative effect on neurological, immunological, and other basic physiological process (Jenkins, 1996a).

Hope is of great importance to nursing practice (Herth, 1993; Miller, 1991; Stephenson, 1991; Vaillot, 1970). Nurses, by establishing a reciprocal and caring relationship, can strengthen hope in their patients and minimize inhibitors of hope (Herth, 1993). They can inspire hope by trusting their patient's resilience (Vaillot, 1970). Enabling the people in a patient's support system to interact with

the patient appears to be a common theme in the nursing literature. Vaillot suggested that mobilising all of the forces that nurture hope—for example, involving family in the care—is an important part of nursing practice. Miller contended that nurses can play an important role in coaching families on how to sustain the hope of an ill family member. She pointed out that in times of crisis a distorted perception of the events involved in the crisis might arise that could threaten hope. She suggested that nurses encourage patients and family to talk about the crisis, thus giving nursing staff the opportunity to correct misperceptions. Miller also stressed the importance of coaching the family on the value of touch and presence as well as using goal-directed interactions with the patient; for example, letting patients know how much they are needed or reminding them of unfinished work waiting for them.

Hope plays an important role in helping adults overcome past adversity, and it is hope that supports the resiliency of survivors of trauma and helps them to bounce back (Higgins O'Connell, 1994). There are, however, few references to hope in the counselling literature, and even fewer focus on understanding how hope helps clients in counselling to deal with adverse situations such as abuse (Wilkes, 2002).

Wilkes' (2002) observations about hope and counselling apply also to hope and postsecondary education. There is little literature on the role of hope in education. Burden (1997), in her study of mid-life reentry women, looked at the role of hope in these women's educational experiences. Her participants reported that their sense of hope was maintained by their relationships with others and by

a sense of spirituality. Hope was a part of their struggle to make sense of the "emotional chaos" (p. 137) of their lives. Hope for these women also involved making choices and being willing to risk. As Wilkes pointed out, hopeful people are aware of the possibility that they may not achieve their desired end; they are aware of the possibility of a painful outcome. That is part of the risk inherent in making choices and taking action.

Summary

Hope is a multidimensional construct that is difficult to define. The word itself can be a noun, a verb, or an adjective; and the language used when speaking of hope is often imprecise. Hope, for example, is not the same as wishful thinking or optimism, although they are often confused with hope. Optimism, like wishful thinking, focuses on a positive outcome and, like wishful thinking, is more likely than hope to be closed to painful feelings. Hope stimulates efforts to seek improvement in an unsatisfactory situation, but, unlike wishful thinking and optimism, hope may still be present even if the desired outcome does not occur.

The presence of hope appears to be important in enhancing health and helping people to recover from illness. It is hope that helps people to make sense of adversity and traumatic events and to be resilient in spite of hardship

Hope can be supported and nurtured by caring relationships, whether these be with family, friends, or professionals. Hope is also connected to a sense of spirituality and a willingness to take action, even if there is a chance that the result will bring more pain.

Reentry Women

The literature on reentry women is derived from several disciplines, including higher and adult education, social work, behavioural science, and psychology. I have chosen, for the most part, to concentrate on the literature that is pertinent to my study. This literature is related to reentry women, personal change, and the barriers that they experience as they pursue their educational goals.

A constructivist understanding of reality is that the world of everyday life is a "taken for granted reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 18) that is socially constructed and maintained. As a result of our socialisation process, each of us develops frames of reference for interpreting the world and the events that happen to us. These frames of reference are meaning perspectives or personalised structures based on cultural and psychological assumptions (Mezirow, 1985, 1991; Mezirow & Marsick, 1978; Williams, 1985). Meaning perspectives are frequently uncritically assimilated ways of knowing and believing and feeling through which our experiences are filtered and that limit and distort how we think, believe, and feel; and how, what, when, and why we learn. A meaning perspective can influence not only thinking, but also action, and, according to Williams, can even justify abusive behaviour towards others.

Mezirow and Marsick (1978) studied women's reentry programs in community colleges. The programs included academic programs offering regular credit courses as well as community-oriented programs that emphasised personal growth, self-exploration, and career planning. The major theoretical finding of

their study was that reentry programs could be transformative for the women who participated; they fostered an altered perspective on life, a change in meaning perspectives. The reentry programs that Mezirow and Marsick studied acted as a catalyst to change. Normally, when we learn, we work from established meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). We tend to accept and integrate experiences that are a comfortable fit with our perspective and ignore those that are not (Mezirow, 1991). In short, we refer new experiences to an existing frame of reference (Mezirow, 1991). Learning occurs when an individual enters a process of reconciling newly communicated ideas with presuppositions of prior learning. Learning that is reflective involves reassessment or assessment of assumptions, and learning is transformational when reflection results in the development of revised ways of interpreting or experiencing the world; that is, when our meaning perspectives are transformed (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Cranton, 1994). The women in Mezirow and Marsick's 1978 study were often forced to develop new roles and new values and insights and to view themselves, their psychocultural context, and their relationships from a new perspective. In short, their educational experience brought about transformational changes in the way they saw themselves and their relationships.

It seems clear from other research, however, that for reentry women, especially those with children at home, the process of transformation can be a difficult one involving a number of potential barriers. Carrying either work or family responsibilities as well as participating in postsecondary education can

result in stress, role conflict, and overload for many women (Edwards, 1993; Home, 1997, 1998). According to Thacker and Novak (1991), reentry women with young children appeared to have fewer supports and reported more strain in their lives, including areas of work, marriage, and parenting, than did a comparison group of older women without dependent children. Lemaire and Home (1992), in their study of adult women engaging in social work education, found that the women experienced multiple stresses. They had too many competing demands on their time. They felt guilty because they were not fulfilling all of their many roles adequately, and, in the words of one of the participants, "We are mortgaging what is more important in our life: our health and that of our family perhaps" (p. 19).

Women undergraduates in general appear to experience more stress as they pursue their academic goals than do their male counterparts (Abouserie, 1994). McGivney (1994), in her review of barriers to learning experienced by women in education and training, suggested that a possible barrier was women's lack of confidence. The women in Ford's (1999) study also talked about their fear and lack of confidence in just walking into a room full of strangers.

Another barrier postulated to affect women's performance both in academia and in the business world is fear of success or fear of failure. Although they are often treated as separate phenomena, Piedmont (1995) maintained that they are more likely to be different aspects of the same phenomenon. Thomas and Thomas (1995) attributed fear of success to sex-role socialisation. Tomkiewicz and Bass (1999) argued that although there have been differences

over time in women's fear of success and fear of failure, for some women they are still a potential barrier to success. This was supported in a recent study of female graduate students carried out by Spears Studdard (2003), who maintained that although returning students routinely outperform traditional-age college students, they struggle with anxiety and believe that they do not deserve their achievements. Given the many stresses and the role overload with which reentry women deal plus the level of violence experienced by many women, it is perhaps not too surprising that they lack confidence.

Problems with multiple roles and stress are not the only problems experienced by reentry women. Education is the major tool for passing on societal values and norms. These values and norms are androcentric, and they pervade most areas of learning and reinforce gender-biased patterns of institutional behaviour (Cook, 1999; Martin, 1997; Mills, 1992). The result is that, traditionally, university and college educators have taught men more effectively than they have women (Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Clayton, 2001); and knowledge and curricula have been constructed from an androcentric perspective (Minnich, 1990; Tripp-Knowles, 1998). Saul (1992), in her study of adult women returning to postsecondary education, noted the importance to the students of curricula with women-centred content. Although there have been some changes over the last few years, problems of inclusion for women remain (Milojevic, 1998; Santovec, 2000).

Cook (1999) maintained that a lack of mentoring or support from faculty also seems to be a problem for women re-entering postsecondary education. She

noted that many returning students felt that universities in general are just not oriented to female students who have family responsibilities. Again this speaks to the gender-biased patterns of institutional behaviour discussed by Cook (1999), Martin (1997), and Mills (1992).

A lack of finances is another potential barrier for reentry women. Most Canadian women are more economically disadvantaged than Canadian men (Alberta Law Reform Institute, 1995; Davies, McMullin, & Avison, 2001; Gilmour & Martin, 2001; Lee, 2000; MacLeod, 1980; Smith 1990a, 1990b; Statistics Canada, 1993; Townson, 2000). For many women returning to postsecondary education, a lack of finances is a significant hardship (Campbell, 1993; Christensen, 1994; Lavell, 1998).

A lack of adequate childcare poses additional problems (Campbell, 1993; Christensen, 1994; MacDonald & Morris, 1986). Women on some form of financial assistance or in low-paying jobs often face both financial barriers and problems with childcare (Women Employed Institute, 2001). Not only is the overall lack of affordable childcare an issue for many women, but having child care available when needed may also be an issue. As Hearn and Parkin (1992) noted in their discussion of women in the work force, even women who have access to daycare may find it difficult to attend important meetings or functions scheduled outside regular work hours. The same problems face reentry women if there are demands to attend classes or other academic pursuits outside of "normal" daycare hours. This again speaks to the gender-biased patterns of

institutional behaviour noted by several authors (Cook, 1999; Martin, 1997; Mills, 1992).

In spite of the difficulties and stresses, overall, most reentry women have found their return to formal studies to be an enriching experience (Cook, 1998; Jenkins, 1996b; Lemaire & Home, 1992). In their review of the research on adult women in higher education, Hayes and Flannery (1997), stated that their findings presented a positive image of women as active participants in their own learning. They were not just passive recipients of subject matter; they sought out and shaped opportunities for personal growth.

Summary

Women who return to postsecondary education after taking time out to assume job or family responsibilities face a number of barriers. Some of these barriers are internal, such as fear of success or failure. Some of the barriers are systemic and stem from organisational and societal structures that are more supportive of men than of women. These barriers include lack of finances and accessible, affordable childcare.

In spite of the potential barriers that they face, most reentry women find their educational experience to be enriching and satisfying. For some women the experience can be transformative; that is, it can result in a change in perspective and the development of a new way of interpreting or experiencing the world. Although there is little literature on abused women's experience of postsecondary education, it can be argued that a transformative educational experience could enhance and support posttraumatic growth.

Conclusion

The intent of this literature review was to present an overview of what has been published on a specific topic (or topics) by scholars and researchers in the field. In keeping with the purpose of my study, I have reviewed the literature in the four main areas that relate to my three study questions. The first asks how women who have left abusive relationships and returned to postsecondary education cope with the stresses and strains of being a student while at the same time dealing with the many issues of abused women. The second question asks what they perceive as the potential barriers to maintaining participation in postsecondary education. The final question concerns their perception of the educational experience as a process that contributed positively to their personal change.

In order to begin to understand how women who have left abusive relationships cope, it was important to review the issue of women abuse and the impact of that abuse. Following this, the literature on how people cope with trauma was reviewed. This was followed by a review of the literature on hope, which was conducted because hope turned out to an important theme in coping with trauma. There is significant literature that suggested that hope is an important element in helping people to grow from adversity. It was my task to illuminate these connections further and to see whether indeed they had any relevance to the experience of women who have left abusive relationships and returned to postsecondary education

The final section of the literature review describes some of the relevant literature on reentry women; that is, women who have returned to university or college after a significant break. In this section both barriers experienced by reentry women and their perception of their postsecondary experience were explored.

A review of the literature concerning women who have left abusive relationships and their experiences in postsecondary education indicated that there is a lack of information regarding how these women cope with the stresses and strains of being students.

It is clear that spousal abuse can be a traumatic event that has numerous potential sequelae. It can also be a catalyst for posttraumatic growth in individuals who are able to shift their perspective and reinterpret their understanding of the world. In their study of reentry women, Mezirow and Marsick (1978) also found that an educational experience, if it is transformative, could result in revised ways of interpreting the world. This transformation or growth can be hindered and helped by other events in the person's life.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH APPROACH

Introduction

Three questions guided this study. The focus of the first question was on how women who have left abusive relationships and returned to postsecondary education cope with the stresses and strains of being a student while at the same time dealing with the many issues of abused women. The second question asked what they perceived as the potential barriers to maintaining participation in postsecondary education. The final question was concerned with whether they perceived their educational experience as a process that had contributed positively to their personal change.

Getting Started

As a feminist I am interested in looking for women's descriptions of their experiences. Feminisms have opened up discourse to include the voices of many women, and feminisms have also been the driving force in the long struggle to name and expose violence against women (Duffy, 1998). For these reasons I believe that a feminist approach is the most useful approach to studying abused women's experience of change. Feminisms, however, are not research methods (Harding, 1987; Wuest, 1995); they are perspectives that can be applied to research methods. My goal in the data-gathering and analysing phases of this research was to allow the voices of the participants to be heard. I wanted to hear their stories and find out what they saw as their coping strategies or the barriers.

I wanted to allow their voices to talk about education and its role (or not) as part of healing. It was clear to me that I should use a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is inductive; it seeks to discover, not test. Qualitative research seeks to describe the world of the research participant while recognising that the researcher becomes part of that world (Mertens, 1998; Padgett, 1998).

I approached the idea of qualitative research with some trepidation. I knew that it was an approach that fit well with my proposed study, and it certainly fit with my desire to allow the voices of my participants to be heard. My trepidation stemmed from my lack of experience in working from a qualitative paradigm. All of my previous research experience had been in using a quantitative approach. I grew up in an educational system that valued "hard facts," my first degree was in science, I married a scientist, and for many years I worked as a researcher in science. Although I have switched fields and for over 25 years have worked as a clinical social worker and educator, I had doubts. I thought that I had transformed my worldview, but could I actually maintain it? Qualitative research, according to Padgett (1998), "requires an unparalleled degree of immersion by the researcher as an instrument of data collection" (p. 3.). Padgett also said that it takes "a good deal of training and experience to successfully conduct qualitative research" (p. 1). Reading this exacerbated my doubts: I had no experience, so how could I be successful? Could I be the "sensitive instrument of observation" described by Padgett? Had I really shifted my thinking from the hypothetico-deductive approach to the interpretive and inductive? I know from my years as a clinician that changing one's worldview

and transforming old beliefs is difficult, and often, under new conditions and in terms of stress, people fall back on old beliefs. I certainly felt under stress.

In many ways my struggle paralleled that of the women in my study. Like them, I am a reentry student, trying to balance family, work, studies, and financial commitments. They too were making large shifts in their beliefs and undertaking new activities while at the same time struggling with self-doubt. I cannot say that I resolved all of my doubts before I began the study, but as I explored the elements of qualitative research, I came to realise that I was not quite as inexperienced as I had originally thought. According to Smith (1998), social workers already use many of the methods and techniques used in qualitative research. There are many similarities between the field notes of qualitative research and the case notes of social workers. Both contain observations, theoretical notes, and methodological information. Interviewing and transcribing interviews looking for themes and patterns is a method commonly used in qualitative research. As a social worker, I have many years of practice making detailed observations and conducting in-depth interviews. In addition, I have some experience in looking for themes and patterns in transcribed client interviews. In using a qualitative approach, it is important to be aware of one's own biases and values (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Being alert to one's own biases, values, and beliefs is also an essential part of good counselling (Hackney & Cormier, 1996). Obviously, like the participants in my research study, I decided "just to do it" and to have hope.

Once I reached this point, I then had to consider what particular research method I would use. Again, because of my background I was drawn to interviewing as a research method. According to Dilley (2004), research interviewing allows us to put behaviour into context and provides access to understanding action. As part of my work as a counsellor and social worker, my goals are to hear the experiences of my clients and to try to understand their behaviour within their context. It seemed a natural fit to choose interviewing as my research method.

The next consideration was how I would actually carry out the study. I was introduced to grounded theory by Dr. Margaret Haughey as part of a graduate course on research methods. No doubt because of my background, I was attracted to it immediately. According to McCann and Clark (2003), grounded theory is an interpretative approach to research that is guided by a postpositivist paradigm. Grounded theory is a way of analysing qualitative data to develop theory (Schwandt, 1997); it uses constant comparative analysis. It is a way of doing research that appears to be congruent with a feminist perspective. Keddy, Sims, and Stern (1996) supported the use of grounded theory as a "viable option . . . for handling qualitative data while allowing for our own feminist theoretical development" (p. 451).

According to Henwood and Pidgeon (1995), one of the criticisms of Glasser and Strauss's original description of grounded theory was that theory could not just "emerge" from the data, that "all observations are preinterpreted in terms of existing concepts and theory" (p. 117). That is, the researcher is not an

objective gatherer of neutral facts. For this reason they believed that feminist understandings of theory and method are in fact most useful in considering the issue of "grounding" in grounded theory. As they pointed out, feminist researchers are concerned with grounding knowledge in the participants' own worlds and experiences, but feminist researchers also recognise that the meaning of women's experiences is always mediated. It is mediated by the participants themselves, by the researcher's own perspectives and interpretations, and by the cultural meaning of perspectives that inform and link the participants' and researcher's understandings. There is, then, support in the scholarly literature for combining a feminist perspective with a grounded theory approach to research.

Two important aspects of grounded theory are the use of theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis. Theoretical sampling is purposeful interviewing with an aim to explore in more depth categories emerging from the data. It is highly selective sampling, and the researcher looks for instances of similarities and differences. It is through theoretical sampling that theory emerges. The researcher reinterviews participants or selects new participants in order to obtain more detail or information about a specific category that has already been identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Constant comparative analysis is the principal approach to data analysis in the development of a grounded theory. In constant comparative analysis, data collection and analysis take place simultaneously. According to Becker (1993), it is a misuse of grounded theory not to use a constant comparative method. It can lead to premature closure, in which the researchers put forth theories that have not been saturated in the data,

and, consequently, the theory generated is descriptive and lacking in conceptual depth.

Because of many difficulties encountered in carrying out the interviews for the current study, I was unable to carry out either a constant comparative analysis or theoretical sampling. This posed a dilemma. If I could not use grounded theory, would I have to switch research paradigms? As noted above, grounded theory is an interpretative approach to research that is guided by a postpositivist paradigm. An interpretive approach focuses on people and their ways of interpreting and making sense of reality. It is based on the assumption that people's experiences occur in context and are not isolated from time, location, or the mind of a person having the experience (Holloway, 1997; Mertens, 1998). Research, then, cannot be independent of the researchers' values, and researchers have to both understand and make explicit their values (Lather, 1991; Mertens, 1998). The significant difference apparent in grounded theory is that, whereas with most interpretive approaches the job of the researcher in the study is to allow themes to emerge that are congruent with the participants' meanings, in grounded theory, after the initial data collection, provisional hypotheses are formed based on emerging categories. Further data collection is then undertaken to seek empirical verification of the hypotheses. Clearly, I could still work within an interpretative paradigm even if I could not use a "pure" grounded theory approach. I eventually concluded that my methodology could be more accurately described as an interpretive approach informed by grounded theory.

Research Design

Criteria for Participation

Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that, in order to obtain varied meanings and interpretations of events and actions/interactions, the researcher must try to get multiple viewpoints. For this reason I initially decided to try to recruit participants from both colleges and universities. I was seeking university students who were enrolled in degree-granting programs and college students enrolled in two-year diploma programs. I assumed that the student population of colleges would be somewhat different from that at a university, because diploma programs are more accessible. As it turned out, because of difficulties in recruiting (see below), all of the students were recruited from colleges, although some were in diploma courses and some in degree programs.

Potential participants had to fulfil several criteria to be accepted into the study. First, they had to be women who had experienced physical abuse, who had left abusive relationships, and who are now participating in postsecondary education. The main reason for excluding the participation of women who are still in abusive relationships is the risk of reprisal if their partners discovered that they had participated. As DeKeseredy and MacLeod (1997) pointed out, in general, women who are in abusive relationships are often reluctant to talk about being abused for fear of reprisal. For the purpose of this research, I also decided to limit the type of abuse to physical because, quite simply, it is easy to define and to recognise. That is not to suggest that other types of abuse are less serious or have less importance; it is just that they can be harder to recognise and define.

Second, the study was delimited to women whose experience of abuse had been in a heterosexual relationship. Although information on lesbian violence is growing, the lesbian community in general has been reluctant to report partner abuse (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997). This may be in part because of the prevailing myth that lesbian relationships are less violent than heterosexual relationships (Hart, 1986; Renzetti, 1992). Lesbians, however, face different barriers even in making the decision to seek services for abuse. There are the fear of encountering homophobia and feelings of shame that another woman has abused them (Ristock, 2003). I am also aware of my own heterosexual gender-based framework for understanding abusive relationships. As Ristock pointed out, differences in lesbian relationships may mean that the dominant heterosexual discourse on domestic violence will not be helpful in understanding violence in lesbian relationship. Because of these additional barriers and my own limitations, I decided to confine participation to women whose experience of abuse had been in heterosexual relationships.

Third, the study was delimited to women who had at least one dependent child living with them. Women with children likely face a different range of challenges associated with returning to school than do women without children. For many women returning to postsecondary education, lack of finances is a significant hardship (Campbell, 1993; Christensen, 1994; Lavell, 1998). Finding time for coursework and lack of adequate childcare can pose additional problems (Campbell, 1993; Christensen, 1994; MacDonald & Morris, 1986). Although having children can cause additional barriers, children can also be a source of

emotional support for their parents (Lavell, 1998). For these reasons I decided to limit the study to women who had at least one dependent child.

The study was also delimited to women whose return to postsecondary education was voluntary. Therefore it was restricted to women who were in academic and diploma programs rather than upgrading or vocational programs. In the current fiscal climate, many women on social assistance are being required to attend vocational and upgrading courses as a condition for receiving social benefits for themselves and their children. My interest was in hearing from women whose participation in postsecondary education was their own personal goal and not just another hurdle forced upon them.

In addition, this study was delimited to women who had been out of the abusive relationship for at least one year before enrolling in postsecondary education. This time span, although somewhat arbitrary, is based on my personal experience of working with abused women for over 15 years. In addition, one year is a long enough period to ensure that potential participants have had time to deal with the immediate crisis of leaving and to do some psychological healing before embarking on educational pursuits. According to Roberts and Dziegielewski (1995), crisis is a temporary state of upset and disequilibrium and is characterised by an inability to cope. Some sort of crisis resolution occurs within four to six weeks. However, in addition to having to deal with the crisis and trauma of abuse, women who leave abusive relationships also have to deal with emotional, psychological, and practical issues related to divorce and separation.

The study was also delimited to women who had completed at least one semester of studies and had plans to return to complete their program, or who had just completed their program of study. This criterion was established in order to recruit women who appeared to be able to maintain participation.

Finally, the study was delimited to women who had not experienced sexual abuse before the age of 12 years, for two reasons. The first involves the actual impact of sexual abuse on a child. According to Everstine and Everstine (1989), childhood sexual abuse occurs when the victims are children up to the age of 11 years. After this time the victim is an adolescent, and the issues faced in healing are different. A developing child is at a different level of identity development from that of an adolescent (Blume, 1990). According to Everstine and Everstine, sexual abuse in childhood radically alters a child's world and may interfere with future personality integration. Early trauma can affect future personality development in a way that constricts further learning and growth (Johnson, 1989). For these reasons the current study excluded women who had experienced sexual abuse in childhood. They may be more likely to be dealing with significant psychological issues associated with the childhood experience, which might affect their ability to maintain educational goals, separate and apart from the effect of the adult abuse.

The second reason was the need to recruit a sufficient number of participants. The only consistent indicator of whether a woman will become a victim of spousal abuse is sexual abuse as a child or adolescent (Nielsen & Dewhurst, 1996). Not all women who are sexually abused as children are abused

as adults, and not all women abused by their adult partner have a history of childhood sexual abuse. However, given the frequency of childhood sexual abuse and the correlation to abuse in adulthood, it was likely that some, if not all, of the participants would be adult survivors of sexual abuse. Eliminating all women who had experienced sexual abuse before adulthood might have meant that the proposed study would have no participants!

Finding and Keeping Participants

I had assumed that finding participants for my study would be relatively easy. Over the years, as an adult educator teaching in both universities and colleges, I have encountered numerous women who had left abusive relationships. I approached faculty members at both a large urban university and a community college, explained my research, and requested the opportunity to speak with their students to recruit participants. My plan was to explain the goals of my research to the students and then leave behind an information sheet with my telephone numbers (Appendix A). This would maintain the confidentiality of potential participants and allow the students some time to review the information and to decide whether they wished to be part of the research. I was mindful of the ethics of interviewing a potentially vulnerable population and of empowering the potential participants (Brzuzy, Ault, & Segal, 1997; Massat & Lundy, 1997).

The first difficulty that I encountered was that some instructors wanted to present the research proposal themselves. This approach resulted in no volunteers. In retrospect, this is probably not surprising. An important part of empowering participants is to "project and affirm a genuine interest and belief"

(Massat & Lundy, 1997, p. 43) in their experiences. Given the focus of the research, potential participants also need the opportunity to ask questions of the researcher. They need to be able to feel that the person to whom they entrust their story is trustworthy. Obviously, if I was not present, none of this was possible.

The second problem that I encountered resulted, in part, from the fact that students have busy lives and, in part, from the fact that staff have a great deal of material to cover in class time and were understandably reluctant to lose time. Some faculty therefore requested that I present my proposal and request for volunteers during the final 10 minutes of class time. Predictably, I did not always get a full 10 minutes and therefore seldom had enough time for interested students to ask questions. In addition, students who were not interested would leave to get to their next class; thus there was often noise and confusion. After several months and five attempts, I was able to recruit only two participants using this approach.

A staff member at a small northern college invited me into her class at the start of the session, not only to put forth my request for volunteers, but also to give a mini-lecture on family violence. This was a very successful recruiting method, and I obtained four volunteers. Unfortunately, it was near the end of term, and when I tried to recontact the four volunteers, two had moved and could not be traced.

The problem of staying in touch with research participants recurred throughout the project. Three participants moved after their initial interviews,

and I was able to trace one but not the others. It had become clear that once I had a volunteer, I had to interview as soon as possible, and I had to accept that I might not be able to re-interview. It was at this point that I realised that I would not be able to do any systematic theoretical sampling.

By now, time was marching on, and I was becoming desperate. The school year had ended, and I needed more participants. I decided to make another attempt at recruiting at another small college. It is a college at which I have taught from time to time over a period of 10 years. Because of my association with the college, I knew the staff and administration fairly well. I approached the college administrator and discussed my recruitment problems. She suggested that I approach the school counsellor and seek his assistance. The college is a small school, and the counsellor knows all or most of the students who attend. He offered to contact several students who fit the research criteria and to explain the project to them. Those interested in the project could then contact me. As a result of that meeting, I was able to recruit the remaining participants for my study.

In total, I was able to recruit and have initial interviews with six participants. Of these six, all were given an opportunity to comment on the transcript of the interview, but only four were available for a second interview.

Three of the women were First Nations women, none of whom lived on First Nations reserves. The remaining three women were all Canadians who came from a mixture of Northern European ancestry. To ensure that I attended to cultural issues appropriately, I recruited Lily as a key informant. Lily is a First Nations woman who is herself a reentry student and who has lived in an abusive

relationship. Lily agreed to review my findings and conclusions and make sure that I was being culturally sensitive when necessary.

Conducting the Interviews

The interviews were open ended and semistructured. I explained the informed consent forms, and they were signed at the beginning of the interview. The interview questions were designed to allow the respondents to answer freely and at whatever length was comfortable for them. Sample interview questions are included in Appendix B. It should be noted that I used these questions only as a guide or *aide memoir*. As their responses unfolded, I asked the participants auxiliary questions to probe for additional information or clarification. I also asked them variations of the questions if it seemed appropriate. I audiorecorded all of the interviews. Each interview ended with a debriefing session in which I asked the respondents for feedback and final comments. The debriefing was an opportunity for the respondents to reflect on the interview experience and to add any additional comments or thoughts. The interviews were held at a place that was convenient for the respondents. Some were conducted in the respondents' homes, some at the educational institution, and some in a coffee shop, wherever they felt comfortable.

I mailed the interview transcript to each of the participants and asked for clarification or made changes over the telephone, in person, or via email—again, whatever was most convenient for the participants. Once the themes emerged from the data, I arranged a second interview, during which I asked the

participants clarification questions, presented the themes, and gave them an opportunity to comment. This interview was also audiorecorded and transcribed.

When I began interviewing, it soon became clear that before the participants would consider my questions, they needed to tell me their whole abuse story, not just pieces of it. As many authors have written, it is through our stories that we weave the events of our life together and make them into a recognisable whole. Telling our story provides a means to retrieve the past in order to interpret our experiences (Franzosi, 1998; Jones, 2003; Lempert, 1992; White & Epston, 1990). Because telling a more complete story of their abuse was significant to the women whom I interviewed, and because I did not want to become, in the words of hooks (1990), "the speaking subject" (p. 152), I thought that it would be important to introduce the participants through their descriptions of their story. The problem, however, with introducing the participants individually is that many of the details of their stories were quite distinctive, and, given the small number of participants, it might have been possible to identify them from individual descriptions. In order to protect confidentiality, I chose, therefore, not to describe each participant individually but rather to present group information illustrated by nonidentifiable quotations.

Confidentiality

Protecting the confidentiality of the participants was a prime consideration in this research. An experienced transcriptionist, who has many years' experience in transcribing confidential documents, transcribed all of the taped interviews. Pseudonyms are used in this dissertation, again to ensure that

there was no possibility of the participants being identified. Of all of the memos and cards with thematic information containing direct quotations, only a number identified the participants.

The Participants

The participants in the study were not all pursuing the same educational goals. Three were working towards professional diplomas: two in social work and one in mental health. Two participants were in degree programs, one in social work, and one in general studies. One participant had just completed her degree in business administration.

The ages of their dependent children ranged from 1 to 12 years at the time of the first interview. The number of children at home ranged from one to four. In spite of their busy lives and the demands of their children, they all gave freely of their time and experiences.

All of the women had endured physical abuse in their relationships for at least a year, and some for more than 10 years. Two of the women mentioned an escalation in the abuse during pregnancy, and for one woman the abuse resulted in a miscarriage. Other participants had broken bones; two were held hostage and threatened with death. All experienced punching, slapping, and pushing. Two of the women were held in choke-holds during the abuse; one was choked to unconsciousness:

> I was horribly, horribly beat up by him. He kicked me in the face and smashed my cheekbone. (Pearl)

Also,

> I was just all black and blue, cut-up lip. My nose was just so swollen from being punched, and had a few lumps here and there that shouldn't even be there in the face alone. (Greta)

For some, even after leaving, the fear of further violence remained:

> I was really afraid of what he was going to do if he knew where I lived, if he knew I was going to school, and like, I—the fear of him is always there; it's still there. (Pearl)

Two of the participants had been in more than one abusive relationship, and one had struggled successfully with an addiction. One participant, in addition to all of the other hurdles she faced when applying for postsecondary education, had to deal with the fact that she had a criminal record, which could have barred her from her chosen area of study. Yet another participant had to cope with the additional work of caring for a child who is disabled.

For these women, telling their story seemed to be a way of making meaning of their experiences. They all found the process of telling their story "a good experience":

> People's stories are key to their feeling of—I don't know; they don't put it in those words, but those are my words and my learning. . . . I wanted to do it, and I wanted to do it as part of my key, my goal. (Beryl)

As I listened to their stories, I felt humbled and awed. I also felt excited because I wanted to know how these women who had experienced so much pain still managed to be successful in terms of their educational goals while coping

with the effects of the abuse, raising children, and worrying about finances and other day-to-day issues.

Analysing the Data

My hope when I began my own journey was that I would be able to do justice to the stories of these remarkable women. Based on my readings in qualitative research, I expected that when I listened to the taped interviews and reviewed the transcripts, themes would quickly emerge and I would have no trouble grouping similar or related themes. For months and months I read and reread the transcripts and listened to the tapes, and I hesitated. I read and talked to colleagues, and still I hesitated. I identified dozens of themes and wrote them on file cards that I had pinned to the walls of my study, and I hesitated. Just like some of the women I had interviewed, I was afraid—afraid that I would miss a vital theme, afraid that I would not do justice to the wonderful data in which I seemed to be drowning. I heard the words of my participants:

> I left a lot of things to last minute because of just being afraid how I'm going to do writing stuff. (Pearl)
>
> I was very afraid I wasn't going to be successful. (Beryl)

Eventually, and in a surprising way, the data revealed the answers. After yet another attempt to see how the themes fit to build a coherent story and yet another consultation with another colleague, I felt stuck, immobilised. At this point I decided that it was time to call on all of my years of training and experience as a counsellor. "What," I wondered, "would I say to a client who said that she felt stuck?" I would likely suggest that if more of the same was not

working, she should try something different. I did try something different. I took down all of my file cards, moved out of my study, and laid them out on the living room floor. As I looked at them from a different angle and in different configurations, the themes began to flow together and categories began to emerge.

Ensuring a Rigorous Approach to the Research

Theoretical Sensitivity

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), theoretical sensitivity refers to a personal quality of the researcher. It is a quality that allows the researcher to become aware of the subtleties of the data. Theoretical sensitivity is an important creative aspect of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is this that enables the researcher to see the research data in new ways and to explore the data's potential for developing theory.

This awareness or sensitivity can come from many sources, but one important source is an understanding of the literature. Although there is little that connects the two bodies of writing, "wife abuse" and women and postsecondary education, there is enough relevant literature in the two fields to help the potential researcher to develop theoretical sensitivity.

Criteria for Judging the Quality of Qualitative Research

Based on work by Guba and Lincoln (1989) and Lincoln (1995), Mertens (1998) identified five criteria for judging the trustworthiness of qualitative

research: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity.

Credibility

According to Mertens (1998), *credibility* in qualitative research comes from knowing that there is a correspondence between the way that the participants perceive their story and the way that the researcher portrays it. There are many ways to enhance credibility, including persistent observation and member checks, peer debriefing, progressive subjectivity, and critical reflexivity (Mertens, 1998)

Persistent observation and member checks. According to Mertens (1998), the researcher should try to avoid coming to premature conclusions about themes and categories. The researcher needs to be engaged with the participants long enough to identify the truly salient issues.

In order to ensure that I did not come to premature conclusions, I attempted to meet with each participant on at least two occasions. I also provided each of them with a transcript of her interview and encouraged them to review their transcripts to ensure that they had actually said what they meant to say. Two participants took this opportunity to clarify portions of their transcripts. In addition, I met in person with all but one of the participants and discussed emerging themes with them. Again, this was an opportunity for the participants to add, clarify, or make changes.

Peer debriefing. As described by Mertens (1998), *peer debriefing* means engaging in prolonged discussion with a disinterested peer who can pose

searching questions to help the researcher confront her own values and to offer guidance on the next steps. The onus is on the researcher to ensure that he or she makes creative use of knowledge and experience while at the same time holding on to the reality of the data in order to make creative use of existing knowledge and experience and to avoid looking for preexisting constructs. Strauss and Corbin (1990) urged researchers to recognise that the data do not lie. It is the responsibility of the researcher to periodically step back and ask, "What is going on here? Does what I think I see fit the reality of the data?" I did this many times. I also invited informed colleagues to review my process and make comments. Finally, I met regularly with my supervisor to discuss progress. I also provided written reports to my supervisor and committee members.

Progressive subjectivity and critical reflexivity. Part of trustworthiness and credibility is continually being alert to one's own biases and subjectivity. One way of maintaining a self-vigilant attitude is to state clearly one's beliefs and then find ways to increase self-reflexivity around those beliefs. After more than two decades of working with women who have been victims of violence, I have a strong belief in their resiliency, their ability to bounce back from adversity. Because I am interested in better understanding how women who have left abusive relationships deal with the stresses and strains of their education and maintain change, there was always the possibility of hearing only what I wanted to hear. I addressed researcher bias by maintaining a research log and recording in this log my thoughts and feelings about each interview process in order to continually explore my own subjectivity. Continual memoing also enhanced self-

reflexivity, as well as adding to the audit trail. As noted above, I also engaged in ongoing conversations related to my research and data analysis with colleagues and committee members. Finally, inviting the participants to review the transcripts and to comment on emerging themes helped to increase my self-reflexivity.

Transferability

Because reality does not exist objectively simply to be mirrored back, it is not possible to ensure identical findings across studies. However, by presenting an explanation of data collection and how the data were analysed, I have increased the chance that other researchers will be able to conduct a similar study. The "thick" description of the respondents' experiences will also help readers to assess the transferability of my findings and conclusions.

Dependability

According to Guba (1986), *dependability* refers to whether a study will yield consistent results in the same situation at some later date. Having a clear audit trail will enhance dependability. My audit trail consists of notes and memos, especially as they relate to the identifying emerging themes. In addition, parts of the audit trail are the detailed reports that I submitted to my supervisor and committee members.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the researcher's efforts to confront personal assumptions and biases regarding the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

This has been addressed in the above section on progressive subjectivity and reflexivity.

Authenticity

Stainback and Stainback (1988; as cited in Mertens, 1998) described *authenticity* as the presentation of a balanced view. It is a way of determining whether the author has been fair to the participants. The presentation of the research design and the descriptions of the participants' involvement in the research all speak to the "fairness" of my approach. Member checks and audit trails also enhance the authenticity of the research.

Ethical Considerations and Safeguards

According to the TriCouncil Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Dalhousie University, 1998), researchers should follow seven guidelines while conducting research: (a) respect for human dignity, (b) respect for free and informed consent, (c) respect for vulnerable persons, (d) respect for privacy and confidentiality, (e) respect for justice and inclusiveness, (f) balance of harms and benefits, and (g) minimisation of harm. In order to adhere to these guidelines, I developed an informed consent form (Appendix C) that I presented to the participants for their signature and then explained the purpose and nature of the research. I made sure that consent was informed by encouraging potential participants to ask questions. I clearly stated that signed consent did not obligate them to participate and that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any stage. I also discussed the procedures that I would use to protect their anonymity and the

physical data. Finally, I made sure that the participants knew that if they experienced any emotional or psychological distress because of the interviews, they could contact me and I would assist them in obtaining counselling.

The University of Alberta follows the above guidelines. I obtained approval for this study from the Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Educational Policy Studies. The proposal also received formal approval from the Ethics Review Committees of all cooperating colleges. Because of its small size, one of the colleges did not have a formal ethics committee, but the whole staff met to consider and subsequently approve my proposal.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The exploration of the experiences of women who have left abusive relationships and returned to postsecondary education was guided by three questions. First, what, if any, barriers to maintaining participation did they encounter along the way? Second, how did they cope with the stresses and strains of being a student while at the same time dealing with the many issues of abused women? And, finally, did the educational experience contribute positively to their personal change? Analysis of the transcripts of the interviews with the six participants identified six major themes: (a) living with the impact of the abusive relationship, (b) internal barriers (c) external barriers, (d) taking time (e) hope, and (f) healing through the educational experience. As will be seen in the following discussion, some of the experiences identified within the themes are common to reentry women in general, whereas some are unique to the experience of women who have left abusive relationships and returned to postsecondary education.

Living With the Impact of the Abusive Relationship

The impact of intimate violence on women who have experienced it is well documented (Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1999; Kemp et al., 1995; Lee et al., 2002; Sleutal, 1998; Sutherland, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2001; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). There is, however, little information on formerly abused

women's experience of postsecondary education or on how they maintain their participation.

One would expect the impact of spousal abuse to have some effect on abused women's ability to succeed academically. Bowen (1982), Rundle and Scott (1996), Gianakos (1999), and Horsman (1995, 1999) all noted that trauma can affect learning. The women in the current study identified a number of issues related to the impact of the abuse that they saw as real, but for them, only potential barriers. These included fear, shame, and ongoing problems with legal issues.

Fear

One of the potential barriers was fear. For many, fear related to the abuse was something with which they had to live:

> And living with that fear, wondering where he was, if he was coming back. What if he did come back? Fear. (Pearl).

This fear is part of the trauma of being abused. Gianakos and Wagner (1987) maintained that the high level of fear that they identified in their research on battered women was the result of the "psychological effects of battering" (p. 224). Dealing with this can take up vital energy—energy that is needed for studying. It can result in an inability to concentrate or focus:

> Gee whiz, I was crying, scared—scared to go out, scared to do things because I didn't want my ex to find out. . . . I couldn't focus. I was ashamed to tell people I was having problems. My marks dropped. (Dania)

For many women, the fear of continued violence is more than psychological; the feared abuse becomes a reality (Anderson, 2003; United States Department of Justice, 2000):

> He came right to the class. . . . My instructor seen him try to hit me, and I'd bounce back. . . . And so I ended up failing the test; I think I got a very low mark. . . . And now I have—just actually last year he tried to [hurt me]. . . . Again I laid charges. (Dania).

Shame

Isserlis (2001) discussed the learning difficulties that survivors of partner abuse experience because they fear being shamed. The women I interviewed did not express fears of being shamed because of some educational inadequacy; however, some of them did raise shame as an issue for other reasons. For one woman, the shame that she felt for being abused limited her access to family supports:

> There's always that false shame that I carried, and who do I turn to other than family? Especially in the beginning, where I didn't want to acknowledge it [the abuse] to my family because of the shame, and I didn't want to hear, "I told you so." I didn't know who to turn to. (Fleur)

For another participant, shame was associated both with material loss (her partner had taken the family car) and with maintaining the secrecy of her situation. Her feeling of shame had a direct effect on her learning:

> I recall walking, and I used to see vehicles coming, and I used to hide; . . . I'd dodge; I'd hide. . . . I don't know; I think I was ashamed. I think I was

> ashamed of walking. . . . I kept it in. I tried to focus on my studies. But to be honest with you, I couldn't focus. I was ashamed to tell people. I was ashamed to tell them, "Hey, I'm having problems." (Dania)

Legal Issues

Living with the impact of the abuse also includes having to deal with a whole set of problems related to the legal system that many abused women find disempowering (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997). Although over the past 20 years there have been a number of changes in the criminal justice system to help abused women, dealing with the legal system still takes time and energy and in the end is not always helpful (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Johnson, 1996).

Spousal abuse is about power and control (Duffy & Momirov, 1997; Gondolf & Russell, 1986; Thorne-Finch, 1992). Once the abused woman leaves the relationship, her abusive partner may try to find other ways, including using the legal system, to maintain his power and re-exert control over her. Sometimes this struggle for control centres on the children, as it did for one of the participants in the study:

> And he's constantly fighting with me in the courts in regards to access with our [child], and it's just another way of trying to gain control. So he's lost me, so now we'll just go fight for access. (Esme)

Often the focus of the ongoing control issues is financial:

> I have to spend probably, oh, three, four hours a month trying to—or maybe two hours a month working with Maintenance Enforcement to try to secure some of that. (Beryl)

Sometimes the time and energy spent are on laying further assault charges and going to court:

> I laid charges. We're still in the process of going to court. (Dania)

Being a victim of spousal abuse gives rise to a number of problems such as fear of the abusive partner and the shame related to being a victim of spousal violence. It also brings with it the additional problems of dealing with the legal system and the ex-partner's attempts to re-exert control.

Internal Barriers

Abuse by an intimate partner can also have significant psychological impacts such as intrusive memories, anxiety, and a sense of inadequacy (Browne, 1993; Stewart & Robinson, 1998). These psychological impacts can become internal barriers that can also affect abused women's ability to succeed academically.

Memories

Being abused can give rise to painful and intrusive memories (Dolan, 1991). For some of the participants, the coursework in which they were required to engage brought back painful memories that evoked different reactions from different participants:

> One time, quite early in the program, I was like, Oh my gosh! We were doing a course where we had to talk about past issues or whatever, and this woman who was in a very abusive relationship ended up staying with her partner, and I had an anxiety attack. I just felt—it was some months

after I left my relationship, and she was talking about bruises and stuff. (Esme)

There was a lot of issues [about abuse] that were brought up in class, and there was lots of crying, lots of anger. (Fleur)

Fear and Anxiety

Horsman (1999) and Isserlis (2001), in their work in adult education and literacy, identified a number of psychological problems with which survivors of abuse have to cope as they pursue their educational goals, including anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. This is perhaps not too surprising because high levels of personal stress have been linked to fear of success or fear of failure (Piedmont, 1995). Anxieties about whether or not they would be successful or be able to do the work required were certainly issues of concern for many of the participants in this study:

Fear. Just fear that I could never—that I would never get into school, that I'd never qualify because I don't have a Grade 12 education. A lot of fears, like would I be a cashier forever? That I wouldn't—that—I don't know—that I just didn't think I could do it. . . . I left a lot of things to the last minute because of being afraid how I'm going to do writing stuff. (Pearl)

I was very afraid I wasn't going to be successful. Fears. . . . I'd sit at the assignment, I'd sit at my computer for hours before I'd start. Our house had never been cleaner. . . . Worrying that I wouldn't be able to hold together inside and not be able to get started. I have never felt I could

> write very well, . . . major barrier. Major barrier, . . . fear of not getting it right, fear of not coping, fear. Nine times out of ten not even knowing what the fear was, just being fearful. (Beryl)
>
> Will I succeed . . . was more so my fear. (Esme)

These fears and anxieties, however, only temporarily immobilized the women. Their ability to say "I'm going to do it" moved them into problem-focused coping:

> When I get those moments of being fearful, I have started to recognise them. It's like there's a wall there, and I need to look at what the worst-case scenario is or could be. . . . I have found that naming the fear is what gets you to the next day, and then all of a sudden it's a week later and you're well on the road, and life goes on. (Beryl)

External Barriers

In addition to internal barriers, it has been well documented that women returning to postsecondary education face a number of external, systemic barriers to success. Androcentric organizational structures not suited to women are significant barriers (Clayton, 2001; Cook, 1999; Martin, 1997). In fundamental ways, many authors have noted that the world of paid employment has not been designed for women. It has neither been designed to recognize gender differences in biology nor to accommodate women's many caretaker roles (Crompton, 2002; Dènmark, Novick, & Pinto, 1996; Erdwins, 2001; Kettel, 1996; Pupo & Duffy, 2000). This is true also for women returning to postsecondary education. Most Canadian women are more economically disadvantaged than are the men (Alberta

Law Reform Institute, 1995; MacLeod, 1980; Smith, 1990a, 1990b; Statistics Canada, 1993). This means that for many women returning to postsecondary education, lack of finances is a significant hardship (Campbell, 1993; Christensen, 1994; Lavell, 1998). For women with children, finding time for coursework is often as difficult as finding money. Lack of adequate childcare poses additional problems (Campbell, 1993; Christensen, 1994; MacDonald & Morris, 1986). Gondolf (1988) found that factors associated with lack of economic independence, such as lack of income, child care, and transportation, were important factors in the decision of abused women to return to their partners; that is, not to pursue and maintain whatever change they had initiated upon leaving the relationship. Finally, carrying either work or family responsibilities as well as participating in postsecondary education can result in stress, role conflict, and overload for many women (Edwards, 1993; Geisler & Thrush, 1975; Home, 1997, 1998; Likert, 1967; Markus, 1976).

The participants in this study identified all or some of these issues as potential barriers and problems that they had to overcome. Some were organizational barriers that they dealt with as best they could:

> There are still a few things that are messages about a very old, rote-learning education system, like one percent per day of late assignments, or no acknowledgment of life circumstances. . . . The attendance policy is that you can miss X number of hours per class, and I think it's nine. So in my program each class, because of the way it's structured, is once a week,

> so three hours a day. So if you miss a day, that's three hours. . . . Every time . . . they'd get sick, . . . it was stressful. (Beryl)
>
> After hours was a lot of problems when we were in field placement. Field placement would want to do home visits and stuff, and babysitting was an issue. Daycare only runs during the day. (Esme)

Lack of money was a struggle. They coped through strict budgeting, planning, and help from friends and family. Sometimes the choices that they had to make were painful:

> I struggled. I struggled, but I managed. I managed to get a car on my student funding. I don't know how I did it, when I look back. To this day, I don't know how I did it. . . . And that first Christmas that I spent with my [children], it was hard financially, because this will always hurt me, because—because I was only able to give them one gift each. (Dania)

Sometimes the solution to a problem caused more problems:

> Babysitting's so hard. I had people steal from me, people not show up (Pearl).

And sometimes the only solution to juggling the many demands of their lives was to miss school:

> There were times where if I didn't have a ride . . . to school, I'd just phone in and say, "I won't be in today." (Dania)
>
> So basically if I couldn't do it (find daycare for a sick child), then I just didn't go [to class]. (Esme)

Many of the women in the current study expressed concerns about balancing sleep, schoolwork, and family responsibilities. For many, the solution was to cut down on sleep time. Several studies have found that, in general, women do not get enough sleep and that they get less sleep than men do (Gender Gap, 1995; Miller, 1993; Sleep and Women's Health, 2001). One study has suggested that women actually require more sleep than men do and that there is a genetic basis for this (Miller, 1993). Long-term sleep deprivation appears to have significant physical health related consequences (Wacher, 2003) and may impair a person's capacity to function effectively (Daugherty, Baldwin, & Rowley, 1998). The effect of short-term sleep deprivation does not seem to be as well documented. There may also be a difference in the way that women deal with sleep deprivation. According to Gender Gap, even though sleep-deprived female workers are tired, they manage to stay awake on the job more than do sleep-deprived men. Certainly, the women in the current study managed to get through their schoolwork and handle their family responsibilities in spite of lack of sleep and fatigue:

> Working on assignments. It's the balance. Even if I've been working all night and I've still got two hours left, I'm not going to get finished. You break at six-thirty to get the kids up to get them off to school. And then you sit back down and try to finish. . . . Getting fatigued. (Beryl)
>
> And so then once he's asleep, anywhere from eight till midnight was the time, depending on if he was sick or whatever, he would go down to sleep, and then I would do my homework after he was sleeping until the wee

hours of the morning. And then after that, then I would go to sleep. So there's a lot of sleepless nights. (Esme)

In spite of systemic barriers such as organizations not designed for women with children, lack of finances, and difficulties with childcare, the participants were obviously highly motivated to reach their educational goals. They maintained their participation in spite of lack of sleep and the difficulties inherent in balancing the demands of family and school.

Taking Time

The fourth important theme that emerged from the data related to time. Violence committed by an intimate partner is a traumatic event (Browne, 1997). Trauma can set into play a series of changes that lead to transformative changes or posttraumatic growth. The time needed to work through this process varies from individual to individual, but it can take a year or more (Tedeschi, 1999). Survivors need time to reevaluate their goals, beliefs, and assumptions about the world. They need time to disengage from their old world view and to develop new or revised goals, beliefs, and assumptions. This disengagement appears to be a necessary step in the movement from victim to survivor, in moving from damage to growth. The study of posttraumatic growth is, according to Tedeschi (1999), a relatively new area of study. Although little of the work has actually focused on women who are victims of intimate violence, the concept of posttraumatic growth seems to fit for the participants in the current study. They moved on and developed new goals, and taking time was an important step in this process.

Time, which could have been a barrier for the participants in the current study, had they tried to make too many changes too soon, became a coping strategy. Taking time allowed the women the space they needed to begin to heal. This is best illustrated in the words of three of the participants:

> I think I needed to [take a year]—oh, because emotionally, physically, I went through a crazy time after that. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep; I lived on cigarettes and coffee and lack of sleep. . . . And then after going through, I would say, some months of that anxiety and not eating and wanting him back, I thought—I really looked at it and thought, I'm making it now; I'm strong enough; so why can't I go further? So I really started thinking seriously about school, and then I started getting in the process of getting my stuff together, transcripts, all that, for admission. (Fleur)

> Another way I coped is, I gave myself a year. I knew I would go back to school; didn't know I would go so soon, because I was hesitant to make any commitment. (Beryl)

> I needed that year, I did need it, because I was far gone. If you had seen me then and you see me now, you wouldn't even know it was me; you wouldn't know. (Greta)

They also needed time to prepare for school, to maintain "a stable home," and to "organize transcripts and stuff." One participant did not consciously plan to take a year off in between leaving the abusive relationship and starting school, but in reality it was about 11 months before she could actually start school:

> I was getting my life in order, so it wasn't like that break from school or from the time I left the relationship to when I went to school—I mean, things were happening for me. I was in counselling, I moved to a different community, different ethnicities, I had to get used to that, I had to get used to being a single mom, I had to get used to living on a Social Service income. . . . So there was a lot of change within that year, but it did help. (Esme)

One student was already in school when she left her abusive partner. Her source of income was dependent on her continued attendance, so she continued her studies without a break, but it was difficult. Not being able to talk about the pain or to take time to work through a healing process was costly to her, both in terms of her emotional health and her studies:

> I kept it [the pain] in. I tried to focus on my studies. But to be honest with you, I couldn't focus. I was ashamed to tell people. I was ashamed to tell them, "Hey, I'm having problems," because my marks dropped. I was up there with my marks, and then mentally I started thinking, Well, as long as I pass, as long as I get that fifty. . . . And with that I just thought, Well, as long as I get a fifty I'm okay; I'll pass. I didn't get much over fifty, and I continued to struggle, and I think why I stayed in school was for the funding state. (Dania)

The importance of a break between leaving an abusive relationship and starting school was also illustrated by the experience of another participant who had been in a previous abusive relationship some years before the one that she

had recently left. At the time that she left the first relationship, she was already in college. After she left the relationship, she experienced a number of emotional difficulties that resulted in her withdrawing from her program at that time:

> I left. I stayed in school for about a month and a half, and then I couldn't handle it. . . . I ended up falling into the gutter, you could just literally say. I chose the wrong path at that point, and I quit school. I started hanging out at the bars. (Greta).

Waiting a year between leaving the relationship and returning to school was clearly important for the participants of this study. The time they gave themselves not only allowed them to get organized for school, but also provided a space to "get through a crazy time" and begin to heal.

Hope

There has been some interesting but preliminary animal-based research on motivation and immune system activation (Larson, 2002). Immune system activation has a number of effects, including impaired cognitive functioning, as does sleep deprivation. Larson suggested that motivation can mediate the effects of immune activity, which suggests that motivation can have a powerful effect on physiology. Cohen et al. (1999) linked optimism in humans with changes in response to immune system responses. They noted that an optimistic perspective protected against the impact of immune system activation. Farran et al. (1995) contended that hope is linked to changes in immune system responses. It is not clear what the connection is between cognitive functioning and motivation, but it would seem to be a reasonable hypothesis that hope played a significant factor in

the participants' ability to carry on in spite of the many problems they encountered.

Hope is a complex construct. It can grow out of our experiences, it can have a spiritual aspect, and it can be part of a rational thought process. Hope can be influenced or nurtured by others (Farran et al., 1995). Maintaining hope is, according to Farran et al., "a delicate balance of experiencing the pain of difficult life experiences, drawing upon one's soul, spiritual or transcendent nature and at the same time maintaining a rational or mindful approach for responding to these life experiences" (p. 9). This ability to maintain a rational approach to responding to life experiences requires realistic goals that motivate as well as the resources to work actively towards achieving the goals. It also requires a sense of control over one's destiny. (Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990; Fromm, 1968; Marcel, 1962; Stotland, 1969). Hope, according to Perry (2002), is the capacity that carries people through challenges, loss, and trauma. People who successfully deal with trauma and convert their pain into growth rather than despair seem to have this personal characteristic of hopefulness (Tedeschi, 1999). It is this ability to think that things will get better that allows people to be resilient, to bounce back from adversity. In finding ways to cope and be resilient, the women in the current study drew on all of these aspects of hope.

Hope as a Spiritual and a Transcendent Process

According to Fromm (1968), hope has no basis without faith, and faith cannot be sustained without hope. For many people, hope is part of their spiritual self, an integral part of their belief in some higher power. For others, the

transcendental aspect of hope is a belief in self, a sense of certainty about the future, with the recognition that the future is uncertain. It is transcendental because it implies an ability to go beyond, to transcend the day-to-day problems (Farran et al., 1995).

> My papers were late, and I didn't beat myself up—there'd be a five-percent penalty or whatever. Things would be okay. I had faith. (Esme)

For most of the women who participated in this study, hope was generated by their faith in some higher power. This hope, supported by their faith, was an important part of what sustained them and helped them to transcend their current situation. This was true for both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women; the difference was in how they expressed their faith. The Aboriginal women identified spiritual practices such as smudging and prayer:

> And in my vulnerable moments, if he would have come to the doorstep and said, "Can I come home?" I would have said yes if it weren't for the smudging, . . . when I couldn't sleep because of this. I'd do things like that, and I'd start honouring myself as a human being again. . . . I think for the most part if it wasn't for friends and a lot of prayer, I couldn't do it. (Fleur)
>
> Dania: In the morning I smudge.
>
> K: In that last year was that a comfort to you?
>
> Dania: Of finishing school? . . . Yes, it was. Yes, it was.

The transcendental aspect of hope denotes a strong belief in oneself, in one's ability to be open to change and new experience, while at the same time

accepting that the desired change may not happen (Farran et al., 1995). Again, for most women, prayer played an important role:

> Hopefully I am going in the right direction. Sometimes I just wonder what direction I am going; what trail am I supposed to take? You have all these little shortcuts over here and there, and you are supposed to walk this one, but the shortcuts look tempting and it's like, God, take me on my trail and guide me on my trail. That's all I can do, all I can say. . . . But then there's some days where I still, I don't know, put myself back in the dumps, I guess you could say. And then I just pull myself out of it, pray again: Where's this [strong] person? Let me find her. (Greta)

For other women, this transcendent aspect of hope was a strong belief in self, in the ability to get beyond the day-to-day problems:

> I was emotionally drained. I did not have the energy to lift my head. I did not. I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't stop getting sick. You come from emotionally drained to where you really, really want your brain for the academic part. You really, really need—your metabolism has to lift up. You have to stand up; you have to get everything and go to school. You have to, . . . you have to get up, make yourself—wash your hair, shake your face, and say. "Okay, I'm going. I'm going to do it! I can." (Pearl)

This belief in the ability to "do it" is not wishful thinking; it is a belief based on recognising that going to school is hard and that there will be days that are harder than others. The women did not allow themselves to be overcome by their current circumstances. They just knew that they could transcend them, and

they kept moving onwards towards their goals. As Marcel (1962) stated, hope is the ability "to accomplish in the teeth of will and knowledge the transcendent act—the act establishing the vital regeneration" (p. 67).

> It's hard, it is hard, and there's days where I do want to cry. But why cry when I have one year left? That's what I have been telling myself these past couple of months. We *can* do it, me and my kids, we can. That's all I think about, is, we can do it. (Greta)

Hope Grows Through Nurturing Relationships.

According to Pruyser (1968), hope is an active process in which hopeful people work towards their goals, but this ability to work actively towards goals is dependent on resources (physical, emotional, and/or social). Without the resources to support the hope, goals may not be attained. People who are supportive can provide some of the physical, emotional, and social resources; this support, based in relationships, influences and nurtures hope. It encourages our confidence in our ability to overcome difficulties (Stotland, 1969). According to Farran et al. (1995), there are many clinical examples that stress "the importance of relationships in offering the heart of hope" (p. 10).

The participants in this study found encouragement and support from many people, and it was offered in many ways. Some of the support was emotional, some was financial, and some was social. Some of the encouragement came from friends and family, and some came from professionals such as teachers and counsellors. The participants had, or found, opportunities to form

relationships in which their hope was nurtured and in which they were encouraged to grow and thus to continue striving towards their educational goals.

Support and Encouragement from Professionals

All of the women in the study felt that they had benefited from talking to a counsellor either before they began their studies or while they pursued their studies. For most of the women, a significant way in which their hope was encouraged was by talking to a counsellor while they pursued their studies. The counsellor whom they most frequently mentioned was a person employed by the educational institution they were attending. These counsellors used what Herth (1993) called "hope fostering strategies" (p. 543). Herth, in her study of caregivers of the terminally ill, noted that hope was fostered when patients were able to share their feelings in a way that seemed to lighten the load. The result was "uplifting energy" (p. 543). The participants in the current study identified this ability to somehow energise the other person:

> She gave me—she'd be excited when exam time would come. She'd just give you that adrenaline; she would. She'd just give me that energy, adrenaline or positive adrenaline. It was just, it was good, it's good to have. (Dania)

Also important was the counsellor's ability to challenge and motivate the person; in effect, to help her to grow emotionally and gain more self-understanding:

> He [the counsellor] made me look at myself internally and externally. . . . It was with that counselling that I was able to be a stronger person, knowing about myself, finding about who this little person is inside of me,

> I guess you could say. But after I learned about that little person in me, I said, "Well, gee whiz, I'm big, I can take care of myself." That's what I thought. (Greta)

This ability to challenge and help the person grow emotionally, to "plant some good seeds," was also experienced by the participants who sought counselling prior to beginning their studies:

> I had the most amazing counsellor when I left, . . . and I think that a lot of the emotional things of past issues of, why did I get involved with this person? What was I looking for? Why did I stay with him?—issues like that she really helped me to deal with, and she's really helped me plant some good seeds. . . . And she'd make me search my mind, and I'm thinking, Well! I'm using my brain! And she'd make me think of things like that and sort of gave me motivation, gave me insights, and definitely seeing there is, that I needed to work on. It helped me to be able to say, "Okay, what needs to be done now? And where am I going in life?" (Esme)

> The counsellors also challenged the students to set goals.
>
> But the counselling brought back self-esteem, encouragement. . . . It gave me things to look for too, to, like, set goals. (Pearl)

An important aspect related to school counsellors was their availability. They were there when the students needed them; their door was always open:

> He's always there, even to this day. I don't use him much now, the past year, but he's still there. I know he is still there for me because he'll come

> up to me and say, "If you ever need me again, come to chat; my door is open. You're more than welcome." (Greta)

According to Warnock (as cited in Halpin, 2001), education is especially suitable to encouraging hope. Hopeful teachers are teachers who help their students to experience success, and they find ways of fostering hope in their students (Halpin, 2001). The participants in the current study were fortunate in having teachers who encouraged hope. They challenged the students to succeed:

> And he [the teacher] made it, the two courses I took with him, he made it very hard on me, not in a sense as for him to see me fail, but in a sense where he wanted me to succeed. (Dania)

They encouraged the students to develop their own voices:

> Professors that enjoyed the challenge, . . . they allowed the opportunity for me as a student to challenge them. . . . So through that, and realising that, oh, way down inside, that, yes I have a voice, a voice being allowed to be heard. (Fleur)

They were able to give meaningful commendations to the students:

> She always commended me on my parenting. She was such a joy. (Esme)

They were approachable:

> I know the instructors, we could always talk to them, could always ask them for advice. . . . Very approachable, yes, and very knowledgeable and willing to help, which made it easy, easier. (Esme)

Finally, they were teachers who were able to share something of themselves with the students and to convey a genuine sense of caring:

> We had the best teachers. All our teachers also had personal experiences. They shared with us, like they opened up their bottles before we opened up ours and constantly reassured us that "It's okay. You don't have to talk if you don't want to but if you want to, we're here for you." . . . Always reassuring that "no matter what is said here, it's okay." (Pearl)
>
> Just a genuine, caring, giving man [the teacher]. I'm able to look at him and think Wow! What a good guy. (Esme)

It was not just that some teachers nurtured hope by being supportive in the classroom, but they were also often supportive in very practical ways. They seemed to recognize and understand the complexities of the women's lives:

> There are still a few things [in the program] about a very old, rote-learning education system, like one percent a day of late assignment or no acknowledgement of life circumstances. But they're minimal, and I've found my instructors use discretion, and the punishment is not always meted out to the full extent of the law. (Beryl)
>
> Our family dynamics teacher, at the time my [child] had pneumonia and stuff like that, very big illnesses, was quite lenient with me. (Esme)

An important source of support for some of the students was their field placement supervisor. A significant problem for many reentry women is reliable child care that is flexible enough to meet the needs of the students with their diverse timetables (Doherty, Rose, Friendly, Lero, & Hope Irwin, 1995; Hornosty, 1998). Field-placement supervisors understood these problems and were supportive:

> And I would try and get a sitter [for after-hours work at the field-placement agency], . . . but then they worked all day; they didn't want to come home and work. So basically if I couldn't do it, then I just didn't go. . . . I've talked a lot to my field-placement supervisor. He would know that I tried to get a sitter, and . . . any hours that occurred or whatever, I had to make up anyways, which I did. But he was very lenient and very accommodating that way. (Esme)

A related child-care problem is what to do when a child is sick. In the Canadian childcare study, Goelman et al. (1993) noted that this was a significant problem for many women. The women in the current study were no exception, but, fortunately, they had support and understanding:

> I remember driving in to my first practicum. My child was sick. I had been able to get someone to watch him for a couple of hours in the morning, or for an hour in the morning actually, and I thought, Okay, I'll telephone, just say I've got a cold. And I was nervous, approval-seeking junkie that I am, but I just went in and I said, "I'm here to tell you that I need to go home because my priority is that sick children come first." No excuses. No lies. Nothing. And like, my supervisor said, "Thank you so much for coming in and letting me know. Goodbye! And if they're not better by Thursday, just call." [laughs] It was like, okay, I have the right priorities. (Beryl)

Support From Family and Friends

In addition to the encouragement the women received from the professionals involved in their lives, they also received support from family and friends. The need for support from family and friends is not unique to women who have left an abusive relationship; it seems to be common to all reentry women (Lemaire & Home, 1992). Thacker and Novak (1991), in their study of the ways that reentry women cope with the demands of school, stressed the importance of support from family and friends. Campbell (1993) also underscored the importance of family support. Lavell (1998) discussed the importance of support from her children and friends as she pursued her educational goals. Burden (1997) affirmed that the children of reentry women could be an important source of hope and motivation. In the current study the children of the participants seemed to be a very important source of support and hope; in the words of one of the participants:

> Looking at my kids is probably what gives me the most push, thinking that I can . . . give them a better life.

According to another participant:

> That's [the children's presence] what keeps me going.

The presence of children was strong motivation that seemed to keep the participants focused on their goals when things became hard:

> I thought of my kids, and then I thought, Jeez, if I quit, what am I going to do tomorrow? This won't get me ahead. So I kept going. (Dania)

In some ways the fact that their children had witnessed their abuse was also a strong source of motivation. There is extensive literature about the negative impact on children who witness their father assaulting their mother (see Guille, 2004, for a review). Guille also presented studies that demonstrated that the actions and reactions of the mother can mitigate the negative impact on the child. It was not the purpose of the current study to investigate this issue, but it is clear that, for whatever reason, the women in this study were anxious to be good role models for their children. They needed their children to see them as more than the mother who had been abused. They seemed to want to role-model resilience as an example to their children, who needed to be resilient:

> And I have to make it positive for her, as positive for her as I can. If she sees me positively going to school and working hard, then it'll be—that'll be something when she goes to kindergarten she'll be, "I'm going to school. I'm like you." (Pearl)

> I wanted to say that what I do has been strongly motivated, and my motivation, my ongoing, okay, inspiration has been so that I can provide my children with a role model. At my graduation I wasn't going to do it; I wasn't going to be part of it. But then I decided that, no, I *had* to do it. I *had* to go, *had* to wear the gown, *had* to walk across, and I needed all three of my children there. They needed to see me complete; they needed to see me take pride. (Beryl)

Although children were a motivation, they were also a source of added stress. For the most part, the participants dealt with this stress in very similar

ways: They talked with their children. One participant involved her child directly in decision making regarding school: "How do you feel because Mommy's going to school?" One spoke of working on developing a "much more open and honest relationship" with her children. Most talked about being a team with their children. Another participant talked about wishing that things could be different:

> I think trying to spend as much time as I can with my kids. For me, I don't think it's enough time with them. . . . It's hard not being able to be there as much as I want to. Sometimes I wish I had the perfect marriage, stayed home, raised my kids right till they were out of the house, and then do my thing. But it didn't happen that way. (Greta)

Farran et al. (1995) maintained that wishing is a useful short-term coping strategy that reduces stress.

Family gave support in very practical ways. They paid for accommodation, helped with transportation issues, and provided childcare. They also provided emotional support. As one participant said:

> And they were happy for me, so they supported me in a lot of ways, . . . just to be there, to visit. They'd stop by just to ask, 'How's everything going?'"

For two of the Aboriginal women, family support also came from "old voices," loved ones who had died. According to Anderson (2000), maintaining connections with ancestral spirits and Aboriginal spiritual traditions is one way that Aboriginal women have been able to resist oppression and "redefine

womanhood" (p. 136). For some of the women in the current study, their ancestors' voices gave them strength and supported their hope:

> And I'd always somehow ask for—although they have passed on, I've always asked for my dad's strength or my grandparents' help, like "Help me through this." You know what I mean? (Dania)
>
> And all I could remember was her [my great-grandmother] telling me, "Do it. You've got to do it. You've got to finish it. You've got to take care of your kids. Nobody else is going to do it for you." . . . She was a wonderful woman, my great-grandmother. I can still remember her talking to me in Cree all the time until I was [number of years] old when she died. And everything she told me, my grandmother, everything she told me, my mom, I just think about what they all had to say, and I try to live my life around it. (Greta)

Friends also provided the kind of support that nurtures hope. Some friends were role models:

> And what brought me through was friends and the people I consulted who are single mothers, mainly one single mother who left an abusive relationship, and she has been out for quite a while, and she's doing really good. So she was my crutch. (Fleur)

Some friends provided practical help:

> When it comes to running kids in four different directions, I've got lots of support from my friends. (Beryl)

> Like, right now my friend and I, we switch our schedules, and we're back and forth. Her son is coming here today at three o'clock, and tomorrow morning she watches my [child], and tomorrow night I watch her son. (Pearl)

Personal Resources That Support and Nurture Hope

As noted above, hope is based in reality. It is not the same as wishful thinking; it is associated with realistic goals that motivate (Averill et al., 1990; Fromm, 1968). For the participants to attain their goals, they needed the spiritual strength of hope:

> I have a faith; . . . that's a huge part of the spiritual coping. (Beryl)

In addition to faith, they needed nurturing relationships to sustain and maintain hope. They also required the internal resources that Wolin and Wolin (1993) called *resilience*; that is, those characteristics that allow a person to accept setbacks and problems as a part of life.

Although, according to Perry (2002), resilience cannot exist without hope, it is clear from the voices of the participants in this study that their resilient qualities also nurtured their hope. Bell (2001) identified curiosity, having the ability to turn the effects of trauma into "learned helpfulness," and having a fighting spirit as resilient attributes (p. 375). The women in this study demonstrated these attributes as they worked to make meaning of the struggles and pain that they had experienced. Although all of the women in one way or another demonstrated their hopefulness and fighting spirit, the words of one of the respondents perhaps best highlighted these attributes:

> Well, because I think—you know how if you hate something, like, if you don't—you hate liver; you think about eating liver and you're just, Ugh, ugh, and you have that feeling; then you always have that every time you have liver. . . . So yeah, try it; try it cooked in a different way. . . . I don't want to hurt all the time, so I have to take it and turn it around into something else. Because otherwise you live with that and some part of you will always be angry or resentful. Like, I don't want to regret my life. . . . I lost my goals of being married and stuff, but I still have a goal of going to school, I am still working, I am still a mother, I still can—. . . My life was almost taken. I had to do something because I had my life. So you wake up and you think, I'm here, and what can I do and how can I do it? (Pearl)

Struggling with adversity and turning it around, looking for opportunities in the pain of their experience, and finding choices were common to the women in the study:

> When I left the relationship I struggled; I struggled for a reason. I struggled probably for strength or knowledge. . . . It was hard. I look back and—but things happen for a reason in life, and we don't know what these reasons are till—maybe the reason was to give me strength. (Dania)

The pain of the abuse did not disappear when they returned to postsecondary education, but they took their experiences and drew on hope in all of its aspects to push open the "boundaries of the possible" in order to move beyond adversity. It was hope that nourished and supported them through hard times.

Nurturing Hope Through Self-Care

Averill et al. (1990) pointed strongly to the link between hope and action. Whenever possible, hopeful people act; they work hard in order to achieve their goals. According to Fromm (1968), hopeful people have fortitude and fearlessness. For the participants in this study, hard work did not just mean schoolwork; they also worked hard to maintain their energy levels and deal with stress in spite of working long hours with little sleep. As Farran et al. (1995) pointed out, energy is an essential resource that helps to maintain hope. Most of the participants talked about their stress levels and the ways that they coped in order to keep working towards their goals. They exercised:

> The best stress reliever for me was just getting on that treadmill to run or that bike or that Stairmaster just to challenge it, (Dania)

They took time to meditate:

> I started taking care of myself as far as meditating, lighting candles, listening to soft music. (Fleur)

Most important, they took time for themselves:

> But you have to find some time for yourself or you'll burn yourself out. Like, even if I come home at 11 o'clock at night and my [child] is in bed, it's from 11 to 12 o'clock at night that I can just sit and think or do nothing or listen to music or watch TV. Everyone needs that sometimes to collect everything, because otherwise you're just totally exhausted. (Pearl)

Goal-Directed Action and Hope

Averill et al. (1990) maintained that there are overarching rules of hope. Hope, according to one of these rules, often involves working harder and thinking creatively about how to achieve goals. Hopeful people are ready to do whatever they can to achieve their goals. All of the participants in the study worked hard at finding ways to maintain their action, their journey toward their educational goals. Although the participants enjoyed the challenge presented by teachers and coursework, they worked in their own way to achieve their goals, and they resisted pressures to conform to deadlines:

> I don't fit everything in. I didn't get a four average [laughs], and I could have if I'd handed everything in on time. . . . I was doing really good work and not just jumping through hoops, so I wasn't just doing the assignment to get it done. And it's for the first time taking a *huge* responsibility for my own learning. Yes, I'd rather give up five percent on late and make up five percent on real learning, real knowledge, and experience acquisition, because that's where I'm at. (Beryl)

They knew what was best for them and acted upon their own assessment:

> If I know I can't do it, then I definitely pull myself out there instead of letting myself down. If I know I am not going to achieve it, it's like, Okay, I'll back up and try again later. Maybe I'll do it next time around, instead of pushing myself and then hurting myself in some emotional or mental state or something like that. (Greta)

> I'm very resourceful. I'm able to assess my own resources, able to assess what I need, that kind of thing, which helps. (Esme)

In this aspect of their life, the women in the current study did not seem to exhibit the feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, learned helplessness, and low self-esteem that have been reported in abused women (Bowen, 1982; Hilberman & Munson, 1977-1978; Maertz, 1990; Walker, 1979). In spite of the fear and anxieties that they had expressed about their ability to be successful, in reality, their fears and anxieties did not seem to result in the same diminution of self-confidence and sense of competence described by Gordon (1988) and Lempert (1992). The participants' ability to act on their own assessment suggests that they had some sense of control over their destiny. They were active agents, not "just jumping through hoops." This confidence in their own abilities seems to be one way in which these women differed from abused women engaged in literacy programs. Horsman (1999) talked about helping women in literacy programs to trust their own knowledge. The participants in the current study already seemed to trust their own knowledge. Campbell, Sy, and Anderson (2000) also spoke of abused women having little confidence in their abilities, of being characterized as "silent knowers" (p. 20). These are women who, according to Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), see authority as all-powerful and who feel passive and dependent. Again, the women in the current study did not seem to be passive; on the contrary, they seemed to be resourceful. The resourcefulness of abused women was addressed in the work of Bowker (1993), who pointed out that women who have successfully ended the violence in their

lives are "active agents" who have resisted their victimization and thus resisted being helpless.

The participants also took action in the form of proactive planning. In their study, Averill et al. (1990) noted that one of the things that hopeful people do when they want to achieve a goal is to become organized. This certainly applies to the participants in the current study. Much of their conversation centred on the need to be "very organized" and "to be prepared to plan":

> Within the first month I got myself a schedule, and it worked. It would be from eight to nine would be for the kids—well, more like seven-thirty to eight-thirty, the kids, and I would do homework with them. Then it would be getting their snack, getting them all to bed. So from nine till eleven, eleven-thirty, every night, that was my time. It was quiet, no TV, nothing, and that's when I'd do my homework. And then I would get up and do the routine again, running my [child] to the day home, seeing the others off to school. (Fleur)

In addition to being organized, the participants had to be aware of the needs of their children and flexible enough to meet those needs:

> When I first went back to school, I actually developed a schedule: supper, five to six; bath time, six to six-thirty; bedtime story, six to six-thirty—very organised. And then it became part of my routine. Then my child turned two, and then he decided that he didn't need no naps or bedtime. . . But still, I just modified it. (Esme)

Sometimes the proactive action was concerned with acquiring needed resources:

> If you know what you want to do, the best thing is to go find somebody who's already doing it and find out how they got there. . . . Like, if you want to be a mechanic, go talk to a mechanic and see what steps they went through to do it, and then go talk to another mechanic and see, because not everyone has the same issues, not everyone has the same problems. (Pearl)

Altruism: Giving Back to Others

There are connections between altruism and hope. Yalom (1995) described altruism as receiving through giving to one another. Shared experiences and altruistic activity appear to offer hope (Rutan & Stone, 1993). Higgins O'Connell (1994) maintained that altruism is an essential part of healing from abuse. In her study of resilient survivors of sexual abuse, she found that almost all of her participants included humanitarianism and social action in their vision of a better world. According to Elliot and Sherwin (1997), people high in hope display prosocial attributes that contribute to the collective welfare. The women who participated in the current study felt a strong need to contribute to the collective welfare: to give back to the community and help others:

> My experience has not been horrendous. It's been difficult, it's been devastating for me, but it hasn't been more than my resources. And yet, I feel a responsibility to take what I've learned and use my experiences with the gifts that I've been given and turn around and give back. (Beryl)

> I know people who have less than what I have, and it's not—like, they don't deserve that. Things need to be changed. I'll never be Mother Theresa, but I'm going to do what I can. .....I look forward to some day I'm going to be what I want to be. Like, I'm going to be—I'm going to help somebody; somebody's going to look back on me and say, you know, "Pearl helped me." (Pearl)

For some, part of this giving back was to become involved in my research:

> It's been an honour to be able to share my story for the purpose of possibly enhancing somebody else's life. (Beryl)
>
> I was very happy to participate in your study. . . . You know what? This is something I need to do; . . . I can do something good for someone else. (Esme)

Healing Through the Educational Experience

The third research question posed to the participants concerned whether they perceived their educational experience as a process that had contributed positively to their personal change. The simple answer is that, yes, they all saw the actual process of going to school as influential both in healing from the effects of the abuse and in stimulating personal change.

According to Breese and O'Toole (1994), adult women who return to postsecondary education may do so in order to better deal with life changes. Trauma can precipitate a life change, and it has already been noted that trauma can lead to posttraumatic growth. The traumatic experience pushes victims into critically examining their goals, beliefs, and assumptions. In short, trauma may

force people to revise their taken-for-granted assumptions about themselves and the world (Tedeschi, 1999). This is much the way that Mezirow (1991) described the process of transformational learning and talked about the learner's first experiencing a disorienting dilemma. This dilemma is a trigger event that leads to some discomfort within the learner, who then engages in a process of critical self-examination and begins to question his or her assumptions about the world and, through the acquisition of new knowledge, begins to explore new roles, relationships, and actions. It was clear to me as I listened to the words of the participants and their talk about personal growth that the experience of returning to college continued the change process initiated by their traumatic experiences.

Personal Growth

Personal growth was one of the themes that emerged. For some of the participants, personal growth was about developing self-esteem:

> I never had self-esteem up until the time I went to school, and now it's like, wow! I've got so much. Super! (Esme)

For others, their personal growth was about developing self-confidence and in some way becoming a "better person":

> It was awesome! It's a huge personal growth, and it's brought me to a level that I know, like, I look forward to next year. I look forward to taking more studies. I look forward to some day I'm going to be what I want to be. . . . It was just personal growth. I said if I don't ever get a job out of it, I've grown so much and learned so much. . . . I'm more confident in myself. . . . It [the experience of going to school] makes me

> better to my friends now, and it makes me better at work, and it makes me a better mom and a better stepdaughter, and it makes me—just, it makes me better to be there. (Pearl)

For some, their experience with the educational process strengthened their voices:

> A lot of healing was done right in this school. . . . If there is one thing that education gave me, that's a voice, that if I don't like it or I don't think it's right or I don't think it's fair, I am going to say so. I will put myself [forward] now, because I'm a lot more strong. (Fleur)

For another participant, going to school helped her to redefine herself as a confident person who could set boundaries:

> In personal relationships [I have learned] that whole concept of setting up my own boundaries and having the confidence to do it and say, "Stop." And that to me is self confidence, . . . believing in myself enough to be able to protect myself. (Beryl)

Independence and being able to take care of oneself was also an important subtheme:

> Being able to be independent instead of relying on somebody to take care of me, . . . I think it's made me a stronger person. (Dania)
>
> I want to be able to care for myself better and work on my weight and stuff like that and grow and challenge myself more, and that's what the program left me with, knowing that I can do it. I can go out there and I can do more. (Esme)

Some of the participants attributed their growth directly to the content of their courses:

> It helped me be a stronger person, especially with some of the courses they have here. It's like with [the school counsellor's] classes, it's more of a look at your own self, your own life of where you want to go, what you want to do. So I can honestly say with [the counsellor's] courses that I've taken in school, it has helped me quite a bit. . . . I feel good about myself. Logic, I've never taken math logic before, problem solving, so to figure out all these things and try to figure out a formula, try to figure out a pattern all on my own, . . . I'm doing it; I'm pushing myself. (Greta)
>
> A lot of healing just through the actual coursework that I was taking. (Beryl)

Changing Perspective

According to Tedeschi (1999), posttraumatic growth is the tendency on the part of some individuals to report important changes in perceptions of self, philosophy of life, and relationships with others after the experience of trauma. Many kinds of trauma can trigger these changes, including violence or the threat of violence. Part of the growth experience is recognising that old beliefs about self and the world no longer hold once trauma has changed things. Dealing effectively with the traumatic event necessitates a cognitive and emotional disengagement from existing beliefs about things such as physical safety and the general benevolence of the world (Tedeschi, 1999). Some of the women in the current study found that their learnings in school helped them to disengage from

old beliefs and to begin to redefine who they were. It appears that an important step in posttraumatic growth is the change in perception of self from being a "victim" to being a "survivor" (Tedeschi, 1999):

> And then through learning, I found out that's there's a lot of similar characteristics between an abused woman and an abusive man. A man that's an abuser, stereotypically, like, has low self-esteem, has had other abuses in the past, and I am more able to see them as victims too. So instead of being—I'm not a victim; I'm a survivor. (Esme)

Their educational experience helped them to put the abuse into some kind of perspective:

> It [the program] put into perspective what happened to me in my life and where I am now. (Pearl)

Summary

It is clear from the literature that relationship violence is a trauma that can adversely affect learning (Bowen, 1982; Gianakos, 1999; Horsman, 1995, 1999; Rundle & Scott, 1996). Anything that affects learning can become a barrier to maintaining participation in postsecondary education. The participants in this study identified several issues related to the impact of the abuse that they saw as real but, for them, only potential barriers.

Two of the potential barriers were fear and shame. The women in the study feared or experienced continued violence. Some also felt shame at being abused, and one participant felt the shame of reduced financial circumstances.

Another potential barrier was the ongoing legal issues stemming from their abusive experience. These legal struggles consumed time and energy, and time for the participants was always something that was in short supply.

The participants also had to cope with internal or psychological barriers to maintaining their participation in postsecondary education. As Dolan (1991) pointed out, being abused can give rise to painful and intrusive memories; and for some of the participants, their studies did stimulate intrusive memories. In addition, some of the women also struggled with feelings of fear and anxiety about their ability to be academically successful.

Finally, the participants had to deal with a number of external, systemic barriers. It has been well documented that women returning to postsecondary education face many external, systemic barriers to success. These barriers include androcentric organisational structures not suited to women, lack of finances, and lack of adequate childcare (Campbell, 1993; Christensen, 1994; Clayton, 2001; Cook, 1999; Lavell, 1998; MacDonald & Morris, 1986; Martin, 1997). In addition, balancing work and family responsibilities as well as participating in postsecondary education can result in stress and overload (Edwards, 1993; Geisler & Thrush, 1975; Home, 1997, 1998; Likert, 1967; Markus, 1976). The participants in this study identified all or some of these issues as potential barriers and problems that they had to overcome.

Time was both a potential barrier and a coping strategy. It was a barrier in terms of balancing the demands of school, work, and family responsibilities. One of the ways that the participants balanced their many responsibilities was by

cutting down on sleep time. Although sleep deprivation has been shown to impair a person's capacity to function (Daugherty, Baldwin, & Rowley, 1998; Wacher, 2003), the women in this study managed to maintain their participation in spite of lack of sleep.

Time was also a coping strategy. All of the participants took at least a year between leaving the relationship and engaging in postsecondary education. It was this time that allowed them to become organised for school. It also gave them the space they needed to begin to heal.

Hope, with its many aspects, was important to the ability of the participants to cope with the stresses and strains of being a student while at the same time dealing with the impact of abuse. Hope supported the women's ability to see positive meaning in the pains and struggles that they had experienced, and it helped them to develop new goals, in spite of their fears and anxieties. They were skilful at finding and maintaining sources of support that nurtured and strengthened their hope.

Hopeful people are also people who act (Averill et al., 1990). This is certainly true for the participants in this study. They were active agents who resisted being made helpless by the many barriers they faced. They were organised and proactive in setting goals, and they worked hard to achieve their goals. They also recognised the need to deal with stress. They took action and developed a number of self-care strategies to manage stress.

The women in this study also showed their hope in their desire to give back to the community and help others. People high in hope want to contribute to the welfare of others (Elliot & Sherwin, 1997).

In spite of the barriers they faced, including intrusive memories, these hopeful women believed that their educational experience contributed positively to their personal change and healing. They believed that the experience helped to develop and strengthen their self-esteem. It helped some to find their voice and gave others the confidence to speak up when things happened that they did not like or when they perceived something as being unfair. It increased their sense of independence and helped them to put the abuse into perspective.

In summary, the participants in this study were able to talk about and identify a number of potential barriers to maintaining participation in postsecondary education, but they remained only potential barriers. Although they struggled with hardships, they did not let problems stop them. They made active decisions about how to cope. They allowed themselves time to heal. They remained hopeful, and they incorporated their educational experiences into their healing and growth.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Writing this dissertation was very much like embarking upon a journey. My journey began with the contemplation of three questions. The first question that I asked was, "How do women who have left abusive relationships and returned to postsecondary education cope with the stresses and strains of being a student while at the same time dealing with the many issues of abused women?" I then wondered, "What do they perceive as the potential barriers to maintaining participation in postsecondary education?" Finally, I asked, "Do they perceive their educational experience as a process that has contributed positively to their personal change?"

Summary

Although for the participants their postsecondary experience was transformative, it was not without difficulties. Many of the participants in this study had to deal with ongoing problems associated with their abusive ex-partners. Some experienced further assaults; some had to spend precious time and energy dealing with the legal system regarding issues such as access, maintenance enforcement, and laying further assault charges. Even for those who did not experience further assaults, the impact of the abuse persisted. There was the fear that their abusive partners might cause them more pain. They also experienced shame at being victims of spousal assault and shame because of the

reduced financial circumstances in which they were living because of the abuse that they had experienced. They experienced fears and anxieties about their ability to do the required academic work, and for some of the participants the actual coursework stimulated painful and intrusive memories about their experience.

In addition to the potential barriers arising from the experience of being abused, the women identified a number of other barriers, such as lack of finances and balancing multiple responsibilities in a sleep-deprived physical state. There is also the issue of androcentric organisational structures that are not suited to the lives of many women. The issue of childcare in particular is an example of this. It is not just finding accessible and affordable care (although this remains an issue); there is also the problem of finding daycare when classes or other activities are scheduled outside regular work hours. In addition, there are the problems of trying to deal with the institutional demands of class attendance and the like when a child is sick. All of this speaks to gender-biased patterns of institutional behaviour that create real barriers for women. All of these are issues that seem to be common to many reentry women. What was most interesting, however, is that the women in the current study identified all of these as potential barriers for other women, not for themselves. Again, it was not that they did not experience problems with finances, childcare, and balancing their many roles, because they did. They just did not perceive them as problems that would stop them. The women in this study coped. They did not let the stresses

and strains that they experienced interfere with their ability to maintain their participation in their educational programs.

Taking time seems to have been an important part of their ability to cope. Trauma can be a catalyst for change. The experience of trauma can result in transformative changes or posttraumatic growth. This process, however, does not happen overnight. Traumatised people need time to reevaluate their goals, beliefs, and assumptions about the world. It can, according to Tedeschi (1999), take a year or even more to move from a state of trauma to a place of posttraumatic growth. During this time trauma survivors disengage from their "old world view" and move to the new. They move from victim to survivor. The women in this study took time. For a variety of reasons, all of the participants waited at least 11 months after leaving the abusive relationship to begin school. This was an important coping strategy for the women in this study. They took the time to disengage from old goals, to shift their focus from a hope-"eating" relationship to hope-nurturing relationships. They took the time to do some healing. They took the time to get organised, to arrange practical issues such as finances and childcare, and to reach a point where they felt strong enough to take on new challenges.

Hope was important to the ability of the women in this study to cope. It was their hope that maintained and nurtured them and helped them to be resilient. According to Helton, Demeber, Warm, and Mathews (1999), people who are highly negative tend to focus on the emotions aroused by stressful situations, whereas people who take a more optimistic view of life attempt to

deal with the problems causing the stress. Although Helton et al. were looking at optimism, not hope, their discussions on optimism closely resemble their discussions on hope. In any event, although optimism and hope are not the same, they are closely related (Farran et al., 1995). In short, because they are optimistic and hopeful, the participants did not let their fears or difficulties become walls; they confronted their problems.

Hope as part of the participants' spiritual selves allowed them to move on past the day-to-day problems that had the potential to divert them from their educational goals. Their hope allowed them to be open to change and to engage in new experiences, even while they were dealing with the impact of the abuse that they had experienced. It seemed to be hope that gave them the strength to "stand up" and say, "I am going to do it. I can."

Abuse involves deliberate and systematic isolation; the women, however, were not isolated or without supports. They found ways to counter the isolation. They are organised women, and when they did not have the necessary support, they deliberately and systematically built connections. If their family relationships were not sufficient to provide all of the support that they needed, they were able to find other sources of support. They found supportive counsellors and supportive teachers. They found supportive friends who could be role models for them and who could provide practical assistance in areas such as babysitting. Their hope was nurtured by the many relationships in their lives

Their hope was also nurtured by their own resilient qualities, by the ability to see positive meaning in the pains and struggles that they had

experienced. They were able to let go of old goals that were not going to be realised and to develop new goals. They were able to say "I still can" and to ask, "What can I do, and how can I do it?" They were able to shift their perspective and reinterpret their understanding of the world. They worked actively at self-care and, in spite of their many responsibilities, were able to maintain their energy levels.

Once these women began their studies, they found that their educational experience contributed to their healing. The experience strengthened their voices, gave them confidence, and increased their self-esteem. It also helped them to become more independent. Some of the women found that their learnings in school helped them to redefine themselves, helped them to shift their perspective and change their perceptions of themselves from being "victims" to being "survivors."

Their educational experience helped them to take that important step in posttraumatic growth: to change their perception of self from "victim" to "survivor." This move to being a survivor could be seen in the women's strong desire to give back to the community. They wanted to use their experiences to help others.

As I listened to the women in my study talk about their experiences, it was clear that their educational experience was important not just for the formal learning that they experienced, but also for the informal learning. Formal learning occurs under the direction of an educator or trainer and is based on curricula (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Informal learning is learning undertaken

without externally imposed criteria (Livingstone, 1999). Many of the women's supports were also sources of informal learning for the women. They had friends who were role models, and they learned by watching and talking to them. They had field placement instructors and teachers who took the time to get to know them and to understand their problems. They cared. They also challenged the women, not just academically, but also in ways that stimulated the women to think about their beliefs about themselves and their abilities. And, because these instructors and teachers had demonstrated caring and interest, the women began to reconsider their beliefs and change their worldview. In many ways, then, their educational experience was a catalyst for posttraumatic growth. Although the study of posttraumatic growth is a new area of study (Tedeschi, 1999), and little of the work has focused on women who are victims of intimate violence, the concept seems to fit for the participants in the current study. They are not victims who see themselves only as abused women. They are survivors who make active and critical decisions about how to cope and move forward. They see the possibility of a future in which things will be different. This is not to say that the abuse they experienced had no negative impacts. It did and does. It created additional barriers for these women, any one of which could have been barriers to continued participation, but they were not. Their hope, their resilience, and their ability to see positive meaning in the pains and struggles that they had experienced supported them on their journey.

Reflections

As has so often been the case in this study, my personal journey has had many parallels with the journeys of the women in the study. I began my journey with a definite goal, and along the way I expected to gain new insights into the educational experiences of the women in the study. As in many journeys, however, I gained so much more. It was also a journey of self-discovery, of recognising that it was not a trip that I could make alone. I needed help and support. It was a journey that forced me to draw on my personal strengths and resiliencies. It was a journey that forced me to examine my worldview. It was a journey that forced me to find balance, both within and without. In retrospect, I can now see that I started the journey with more wishful thinking than hope, but without hope I would never have reached my goal.

As I reflect upon my experience, I find myself wondering what, if anything, I would have done differently. Clearly, I would not have tried to recruit participants at the end of a school year. Ideally, participants would be recruited at the beginning of term, allowing time for preliminary data analysis and a second interview before the end of term. Trying to locate and reconnect with participants after a long break can be difficult. However, it still may not have been possible to carry out the grounded theory study that I had originally planned. Data analysis takes time. Carrying out the initial interviews, doing some data analysis, and then trying to fit in the second interview and so on still may not have been possible within the time constraints of an academic year. The

women themselves had many commitments, and it may have been very difficult for them to have given the time needed.

Doing the initial reading and preparation for a grounded theory study was, however, helpful. Grounded theory is an interpretative approach to research that is guided by a postpositivist paradigm (McCann & Clark, 2003). It uses postpositive terms such as hypothesis and equates data to "facts." A goal of grounded theory is to develop theory that can then be tested, allowing predictions to be developed deductively from general principles (Stern, 1980). Clearly, because of my own training in the postpositivist paradigm, these similarities allowed me to feel comfortable with the approach. Paradoxically, it was because of these similarities that I came to understand the interpretative paradigm more fully. I had to focus on the differences in order to understand why grounded theory was part of the interpretative paradigm. The postpositivist paradigm assumes that the social world can be studied like the natural world and that only one reality exists. It is the job of the researcher to discover this reality, to determine the "facts" using experimental or quasi-experimental methods. The methods used are primarily quantitative, and the participants are subjects of the study. The approach decontextualizes the participants' input. The researcher and subject(s) are assumed to be independent of one another. In fact, the researcher strives for objectivity to prevent values or biases from influencing the outcome (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Mertens, 1998).

The interpretative paradigm recognises that that there is not just one true reality to be discovered, and the researcher is an active participant in the

research process. The researcher and the participants are engaged in an interactive process in which the participants' input is seen in context (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Mertens, 1998). Methods used in interpretative research include interviewing and observation, and grounded theory also uses interviewing and observation. Grounded theory, like all interpretative work, recognises that the researcher's own views do have some impact on the research process, although the researcher is urged to enter the research setting with as few predetermined ideas as possible (Bryant, 2002). Baszanger and Dodier (1997) pointed out that grounded theory is an important part of a collaborative approach to research that involves the conceptualisation of data from the informant's and the researcher's perspectives.

This process of thinking about grounded theory and the interpretative work was very helpful in allowing me to complete my shift from a postpositive view of the world to an interpretative view. I sensitised myself to my inclination to look for causal explanations and refocused myself on the interpretative view to seek an understanding of how people experience the world.

As I continue to reflect on the actual process of doing the research, I find myself wondering whether conducting a focus-group session with all of the participants might have been an illuminating experience. Even interviewing the participants alone, I found that their energy and excitement were almost palpable. Having all of that energy and excitement in the same room would have been overwhelming. Watching and listening as the women shared their experiences may have provided even more richness of data.

I think that it is this energy and the determination of the women to achieve their goals that will stay with me. Their sheer courage to go on in spite of their pain and the potential barriers is inspiring. Their continued ability to reach out and recruit support and not to give up either on themselves or other people is extraordinary.

Clearly, with only six participants in this study, the findings cannot be generalised to all abused women returning to postsecondary education. The information obtained, however, does add to the knowledge base. It is a starting point, a place from which to build and increase our understanding about the experience of abused women as they return to postsecondary education.

Implications of the Research

As has been mentioned above, with only six participants in this study, the findings cannot be generalised to all abused women returning to postsecondary education. Nevertheless, the information obtained does have useful implications for both practice and future research.

Implications for Practice

There are several points arising from this study that have the potential to be useful to both teachers and administrators in postsecondary education. First, it is likely not to be sufficient just to have student counselling services available; they also need to be accessible. To be accessible to women who are balancing children and school whilst at the same time dealing with trauma, they have to be accessible on the students' timetables. These women are too busy and, at times, in too much pain to wait.

Second, having teachers who were approachable and who were genuinely willing to help was an important issue for the women in this study. It should be remembered that although they are women who actively engaged in posttraumatic growth, they are still struggling with the impact of abuse. They have problems with self-esteem, fear of failure, and claiming their voice. They need teachers who are able and willing to "project and affirm a genuine interest" (Massat & Lundy, 1997, p. 43).

Third, the presence of teachers who were approachable and who were genuinely willing to help with nonacademic issues and the availability of counsellors were important factors in encouraging the participants' informal learning. It was this informal learning that was so important in their posttraumatic growth.

In addition, women who have left abusive relationships and have dependent children need some flexibility in terms of rules and policies. Parenting alone is difficult, and it is not possible to predict when a child will become ill. Dealing with the legal system takes time, as do arranging childcare and obtaining finances. Deadlines for assignments cannot always be met, and, from time to time, classes cannot always be attended. Educators could perhaps bear in mind that these are very organised women who are very capable of seeking out the help they need, if given a chance. They are unlikely to see the flexibility as an opportunity to "goof off."

Implications for Future Research

In the current study the fact that most of the participants attended school on small campuses seems to have been important. They were thus able to quickly get to know people who could help and support them, and student counsellors and advisors were readily available. They did not have to set up formal appointments; they could just walk in. This raises the questions, How do women who have left abusive relationships cope if they attend larger schools? Is it as easy to find instructors who are able to offer extra support? Are counselling services as accessible? If not, how do they deal with these potential barriers? This would be an interesting extension of the current research.

It should also be noted that half of the participants were Aboriginal women. This was not planned, and thus this study was not designed to explore the impact of issues such as racism and oppression. Although these issues did not arise during the study, it is possible that with a different design, different questions, and a different researcher, issues such as these may have been revealed. This is also something that could be explored as an extension of the current research.

The participants also attended traditional classroom-based programs. According to Kumar and Sadiq Sohail (2002), the number of people accessing distance education programs worldwide is increasing. Distance education involves imparting knowledge beyond the traditional borders of the classroom using print, video, telephone, or Web-based methods of teaching. Given the difficulties that women face in balancing home, work, and school, one might

assume that many distance-education students are women and that a number might be women who have left abusive relationships. If this is so, it raises a number of potential research questions for distance educators, including those concerning availability of and access to support.

Obviously, in the current research study, by its very design, I concentrated on women who were succeeding at their educational endeavours. Future research could focus on women who have left abusive relationships, started postsecondary education, and were not able to continue. How do they differ from the women who are successful? Are they less hopeful? Do they have fewer supports? Do they experience other barriers and stresses?

Recommendations

For Practice

1. That institutions of higher education ensure that they have adequate and accessible counselling services. At least some of these services should be available through a no-appointment, "drop-in" system.
2. That instructors build in some flexibility in terms of rules and policies around class attendance and assignment deadlines.
3. That institutions of higher education consider developing programs that allow instructors more time to be accessible to students.
4. That institutions of higher education develop mentorship programs and support the mentoring of students such as women who have left abusive relationships.

5. That institutions of higher education develop preregistration orientation programs that allow them to identify women who have recently left abusive relationships. These women could then receive counselling and encouragement to take the time they need to heal before registering in a formal program. Women who have been out of the relationship for at least a year could be assigned mentors.

For Research

1. How do women who have left abusive relationships and returned to postsecondary education cope with the stress and strains of being students on a large university campus while at the same time dealing with the many issues of abused women?
2. How important is the issue of support for women who have left abusive relationships and chosen to participate in postsecondary education at a distance? Do they have quick and immediate access to supports such as instructors or counselling services?
3. How do the experiences of women who have left abusive relationships and attempted unsuccessfully to complete a postsecondary education program differ from the experiences of women who have left abusive relationships and been successful in their pursuit of postsecondary education?

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APPENDIX A

RESEARCH INFORMATION AND INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Appendix A

Research Information and Invitation to Participate

My name is Karen Nielsen. I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta, in the Department of Educational Policy studies. I would like you to take part in my research. I am looking for participants who are adult women who have:

- Experienced living in a physically abusive heterosexual relationship for at least one year. The physical abuse may have ranged from pushing to pinching, slapping, punching, kicking or hair pulling. Physical abuse is also any abusive behaviour that involves a weapon or any object used to inflict pain or injury
- Been out of the relationship for at least one year and no longer than five years

Participants must also be:

- Enrolled in an undergraduate degree or diploma granting program in a college or university, and have finished at least one year of their program and have plans to complete the course.
- Have at least one dependent child living with them.

They should also be women who have not experienced sexual abuse during childhood i.e. before twelve years of age.

The goals of my research are to explore how women who have left an abusive relationship and returned to post-secondary education maintain their participation in post-secondary education, and how they cope with the stresses and strains associated with being a returning student while at the same time dealing with the many issues of abused women.

As a participant you will not be paid for your participation in the study. While there is no direct substantial benefit to you from this research, other than the opportunity to tell your story, the results will help to a broaden our understanding of formerly abused women's ability to maintain participation in

post-secondary education. A clearer understanding of this may help post-secondary educational institutions to put in place helpful policies and procedures.

If you agree to participate in the research, I will be asking you to take part in three separate interviews over a period of approximately six months. Each interview will last for between one and two hours. The interviews will be scheduled to take place at a time and location that is convenient for you.

All of the information that I obtain about you during the interview will be kept confidential. Any resulting publications or public presentations will not identify you directly or indirectly without your specific permission. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you agree to take part, you will be free at anytime to withdraw.

If you would like to participate or you have any have any questions about the research, you may call me, Karen Nielsen at 463-5857 or email me at karenn@athabascau.ca

Thank you for time.

Karen Nielsen, BSW, MEd

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW FORMAT AND SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Appendix B

Interview Format and Sample Questions

(The questions in section three are meant to be only a guide to the interviewer. They may change as the interview proceeds and they may change from interview to interview).

Section One: Introduction and Getting Acquainted

1.1. Introduction and explanation of interview purpose

1.2. Questions asked by participant addressed

1.5. Consent form discussed and signed

Section Two: Demographic Data and Abuse History

(This part of the interview WILL NOT be taped and will be stored in a secure place, separately from the tape and transcript.)

2.1. Interview Number Code

2.2. Interview Name

2.3. Age

2.4. Name of Institution Attended.

2.5. Name of Degree or Diploma Program

2.6. Length of program

2.7. Number of years completed

Number of years living in an abusive relationship

2.5. Length of time out of the abusive relationship

2.6. Ages of children living at home

2.7. Have you received any counselling to help you deal being abused? If yes, how long and is it still ongoing.

2.8. Did you experience sexual abuse as an adolescent?

2.9. If yes, have you received any counselling to help you deal with this? If yes, how long and is it still ongoing.

Section Three

The questions in section three are meant to be only a **guide** to the interviewer. They will only be used to prompt for further information, if this information is not forthcoming or to refocus the interview. These questions may change as the interview proceeds and they may change from interview to interview.

Preamble

The purpose of my research is to explore how women who have left an abusive relationship and returned to post-secondary education maintain their participation in post-secondary education. I am interested in how they cope with the stresses and strains associated with being a returning student while at the same time dealing with the many issues of abused women.

3.1. Being abused and leaving an abusive relationship can affect a person in many ways, financially, physically, psychologically and emotionally. How do you cope with the stresses and strains associated with maintaining your participation in post secondary education, while at the same time dealing with the many issues faced by abused women?

3.2. Tell me about any outside influences or supports that encourage you to continue with your education.

3.3. Tell me about any outside influences or obstacles that discourage you from continuing with your education (Possible probes: finances, child-care responsibilities, lack of time, loneliness, isolation, fear).

3.4. What is your experience with your fellow students? Are they supportive and understanding? (Possible probes: Do they know about your experience in an abusive relationship? Have you met other women who have been in abusive relationships?

3.5. What is your experience with your teachers. Are they supportive and understanding? (Possible probes: Do they know about your experience in an abusive relationship?).

3.6. Are there additional questions related to your maintaining your participation in your program that you would like to elaborate on? Questions you thought I would ask but I didn't?

Section Four: Debriefing

4.1. Feedback from participants regarding the interview experience.

4.2. Closure

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

I am aware that I have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Karen Nielsen M.Ed., a graduate student in the department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. The research is part of a doctoral dissertation. I have been selected as a participant in this study because I am:

- A formerly abused woman who has not experienced childhood sexual abuse before the age of 12 years of age.

I also have:

- Experienced living in a physically abusive heterosexual relationship for at least one year. The physical abuse may have ranged from pushing to pinching, slapping, punching, kicking or hair pulling. It may also have been any abusive behaviour that involved a weapon or any object used to inflict pain or injury
- Been out of the relationship for at least one year and no longer than five years
- Been enrolled in an undergraduate degree or certificate granting academic program in a college or university for at least one year and have plans to complete the course.
- At least one dependent child living with me.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to explore how women who have left an abusive relationship and returned to post-secondary education maintain their participation in post-secondary education, and how they cope with the stresses and strains associated with being a student while at the same time dealing with the many issues of abused women.

PROCEDURES

I am aware that if I volunteer to participate in this study, I will be asked to take part in three separate interviews over a period of six months. Each interview will last for between one and two hours. The interviews will be scheduled to take place at a time and location that is convenient for me.

POTENTIAL RISKS

I understand that discussing issues related to the abuse I experienced might cause me emotional or psychological distress. If this occurs, and I feel the need for professional help, I aware that Karen Nielsen will assist me to obtain counselling.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

I understand that there is no direct substantial benefit to me from this research, but that the results will help to broaden the understanding of formerly abused women's ability to maintain participation in post-secondary education. A clearer understanding of this may help post-secondary educational institutions to put in place helpful policies and procedures.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

As a participant I am aware that I will not be paid for my participation in the study

CONFIDENTIALITY

- I understand that any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify me will remain confidential. My given name only will be used on the taped interview and the transciber will substitute a pseudonym. Only the researcher will maintain a record of the substitution. Any material publicly presented or published as a result of this research will contain non-identifying material.

- As part of this study, I will have the right to review the transcripts of the taped interview and make whatever changes I deem to be necessary.

- Tapes will be identified by number and not by name. Only Karen Nielsen will have the key to link names to numbers. All interview notes, tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet for a period of five years and will be destroyed April 10, 2005.

- An experienced transcriber will be used to transcribe the taped interviews. The transciber chosen has experience working with sensitive material for a number of researchers at the University of Alberta.

USES OF THE DATA OBTAINED IN THIS STUDY

- I understand that the data obtained form this study may be presented publicly either at conferences, workshops or in classroom discussions. It may also be published and circulated in a dissertation, reports, conference publications, workshop handouts, information sheets or journal articles. None of the data will identify me directly or indirectly.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

I can choose whether to be in this study or not. If I volunteer to be in this study, I may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. I may also refuse to answer any questions I don't want to answer and still remain in the study.

CONCERNS AND QUESTIONS

If I have any questions or concerns about the research, I am free to contact Karen Nielsen at 463-5859, email karenn@athabscau.ca.

Karen is supervised by Dr. B. Young. Dr. B. Young can be contacted at 492-7617, email beth.young@ualberta.ca

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____

Name of Participant

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

_____ _____

Signature of Investigator Date